

# 1 The Humanism Debate Revisited

## Sartre, Heidegger, Derrida

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The origins of our contemporary posthumanist sensibility can be traced back to an exchange on humanism that involved Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger in the mid 1940s. The philosophical question of humanism – what is it and whether it is an (un)tenable position – is of relevance because it is the one that grants legitimacy to the anthropological enquiry that I pursue in the rest of this book.

The first intervention on which I concentrate is Sartre's (2007) *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. A lecture that was originally delivered in October 1945, this was not a conventional academic talk. It was rather an intervention in a tense atmosphere and in front of an audience for whom philosophical questions were very much subordinated to political concerns. The second text is Heidegger's (1993a) *Letter on Humanism*. Written in the second half of 1946 and then reworked for publication the following year, the piece started life as a request to comment and expand on the theme of Sartre's lecture, which among other sources had drawn on Heidegger's pre-war writings. I contend that these two pieces have framed the terms within which questions about the status of the human – epistemologically, conceptually and normatively – are still being discussed in contemporary social science and philosophy. In order to highlight the ways in which the debate has been handed down to us, in the last section of the chapter, I also look at Jacques Derrida's (1982) essay *The Ends of Man*. First written in April 1968 and an early instalment in Derrida's long-term reassessment of Heidegger's work, this piece helps consolidate *the critique of humanism* as a 'by-default' position normative position.<sup>1</sup> The chapter is therefore

<sup>1</sup> By the time of the publication of Derrida's text, the question of humanism had already become a major topic of political and philosophical debate in France – and not only within 'existentialist' circles. We can mention Louis Althusser's (1969, 2003) essays on humanism, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1964, 1969) texts *Marxism and Humanism* and *Sense and Non-sense*, the last chapter in Claude Levi-Strauss's (1970) *The Savage Mind*, the three essays that are reunited in Emmanuel Levinas's (2006) *Humanism of the Other* and, of course, Michel Foucault's (1997) chapter on the end of man in *The Order of Things*.

devoted to analysing the ways in which humanism is being defined in these texts, how and why they distinguish between different forms of humanism, the relationships between humanism and anthropocentrism, and the limitations and contradictions of humanist positions. In fact, they all thought that *some* form of humanism must be favoured over others while rejecting openly anti-humanist arguments.<sup>2</sup> I am aware that, by concentrating on a handful of relatively short interventions by three writers who produced an impressive output, questions can be raised as to my ability to make a general assessment of their philosophies. I have therefore made use of additional texts in order to contextualise their wider positions and be able to comment on their intellectual orientation as a whole. Before we start, let me briefly say a few words about each of these pieces, their context, and how I have approached them.

*Existentialism Is a Humanism* remains Sartre's most popular piece. Even as its position within his larger body of work remains controversial, this lecture was key in establishing Sartre's reputation as France's leading public intellectual (Baehr 2015). One common view is to take *Existentialism* as an anomaly within Sartre's enormous literary production; here, the somewhat naive endorsement of humanism is seen as incompatible with, for instance, his earlier and philosophically more consistent use of 'nothingness'. Above all, the claim is that Sartre's genuine position would be more accurately represented in 'anti-humanist' passages in various novels, plays and indeed his extensive political writings for over thirty years.<sup>3</sup> Not without merit, I think a major problem with this position is, quite simply, that there is not a single philosophical, let alone normative or political, doctrine to be derived from Sartre's works as a whole. This is clear in the major shifts to be

<sup>2</sup> From the literature that I mentioned in note 1, only Althusser (1969: 229) speaks favourably of anti-humanism in a strong sense, but even he qualifies this statement as a strictly philosophical (rather than an ethical) position: 'one can and must speak openly of *Marx's theoretical anti-humanism*, and see in this *theoretical anti-humanism* the absolute (negative) precondition of the (positive) knowledge of the human world itself, and of its practical transformation. It is impossible to *know* anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes'.

<sup>3</sup> See Craib (1976: 3) for the argument on the exceptional position of the humanism lecture in Sartre's position and Lafarge (1970) for an anti-humanist interpretation of Sartre. Soper (1986: 23) and Feher (1991b: 567) highlight anti-humanist passages in *Nausea*, *The Family Idiot* and *Saint Genet*, whereas Aronson (1980: 169, 176) and Birchall (2004: 109–12) illustrate Sartre's erratic use of humanist tropes in various political contexts: for instance, in his oath of hatred against the bourgeoisie, his reluctance to repudiate Stalin's camps (or even to compare them with Hitler's camps), or in his uncritical support of anti-colonial struggles. Incidentally, Craib (1976: 85–92, 215–28) uses the idea of *philosophical sociology* in his reassessment of the relationships between Sartre's philosophy and mainstream sociology. Our emphases are different, however, because Craib concentrates on what Sartre can offer as a critique of sociological functionalism, while I am interested in the way in which he articulates a humanist position.

found between the ‘phenomenological’ sensibility of *Being and Nothingness*, that was first published in 1943, and the ‘Marxist’ outlook of *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (first published in 1960). But even if philosophical inconsistencies were possible to iron out, there is no continuity either in Sartre’s highly volatile political commitments and commentary: the explicit apolitical tone of his work in the 1930s, his vocal anti-Stalinism after the Hitler–Stalin pact of 1939, the ‘existentialist’ moment during and immediately after the Second World War, his ‘democratic socialism’ period of 1946 and 1949, his rapprochement towards the French Communist Party and Soviet Russia between 1952 and 1956, his turn towards anti-colonialism in the 1960s plus his final Maoist period.<sup>4</sup> *Existentialism Is a Humanism* is then as good a text as any other to speak about Sartre; what we have here is a rare text in which Sartre explicitly tries to articulate an optimistic type of politics that is informed by an ethical position (Aronson 1980: 288, Keefe 1988, Levy 2002: 41–57). Moreover, given that Sartre is there explicitly drawing on some of Heidegger’s arguments in *Being and Time*, the piece also offers an excellent vantage point to compare and contrast their positions – if not to reassess Sartre’s debt to Heidegger (Haar 1980, Theunissen 1985). Above everything else, *Existentialism* captures extremely well the fundamentals of the modern humanist sensibility in both its strengths and weaknesses.

Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* is commonly seen as a transitional piece between his early publications before 1933 – most centrally *Being and Time*, which first appeared in 1927 – and those writings from after 1945.<sup>5</sup> *Letter* is said to be central to the ‘turn’ (*die Kehre*) of Heidegger’s philosophy, in so far as it marks a shift from his original preoccupation with *Dasein* as a form of historical phenomenology to his more explicit reflections on being in general that rejected any anthropology as unwarranted metaphysics: *Letter* is fundamentally concerned with the need to subordinate questions about ‘man’ to questions about ‘being’. Heidegger composed the text in 1946 as a request from French philosopher Jean Beaufret and, partially at least, in order to respond to Sartre’s *Existentialism* lecture. Beaufret visited Heidegger for the first time in June 1944 and *Letter* is the most famous text of what effectively was a dialogue that lasted over thirty years and gave birth to a series of

<sup>4</sup> See Flynn (1988) for a summary account of Sartre’s politics. Maybe unsurprisingly, those who read Sartre primarily as a philosopher show a greater need for finding unity within his work (Atwell 1986, Craib 1976, Lafarge 1970, Levy 2002, Weinstein and Weinstein 1971), whereas biographers are more reconciled to the fact that he was a deeply contradictory character and we should not try to find a single consistent perspective (Aronson 1980, Birchall 2004, Cohen-Solal 1991, Hayman 1986, Thody 1971).

<sup>5</sup> For general context, see Bourdieu (1991: 90–4), Hayman (1986: 283–4), Kleinberg (2003: 157–206), Rabinbach (2000: 97–128), Rockmore (1995: 98–103), Safranski (1998: 332–56).

volumes, conferences and conversations.<sup>6</sup> Biographically, Heidegger composed this text under difficult personal circumstances: he was living under French-administered territories and was right in the middle of the trials that were to decide on his academic future given his actions, on behalf of the Nazi regime, as rector of the University of Freiburg. Heidegger was not allowed to move freely, feared incarceration and confiscation of property, his pension rights were hanging in the balance and soon afterwards he was deprived of his teaching rights (he was to be reinstated to his teaching position in 1951). Perhaps we ought to read *Letter* mostly as a strategic attempt by Heidegger to look after himself during such an uncertain time: beyond the unusual emphasis he places in the 'correct' interpretation of *Being and Time* as a *rejection* of any form of anthropology, his criticism of Sartre has been seen as a bitter reaction to a meeting that failed to materialise at the time (their only meeting took place in 1952), the reference to Marx in the text has been read as a nod to Soviet authorities under which his son remained captive and, crucially, his critique of metaphysics has been interpreted as a strategy to distance himself from the Nazis.<sup>7</sup> Below, I will concentrate on the *philosophical* reasons that make the *critique* of Sartre's humanism central to unpacking the normative implications of Heidegger's thinking. But given both the context and content of *Letter*, there is also a *prima facie* case for discussing Heidegger's engagement with Nazism and its implications for his philosophical work.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Derrida's piece *The Ends of Man* needs to be seen as part of a general effort among several notable French intellectuals in coming to terms with two general questions: first, the role of humanism in philosophy and, second, the troubling relationships between thinking and politics in Heidegger's work.<sup>9</sup> This piece inaugurates a long-lasting engagement with Heidegger's philosophy and politics – one that looks increasingly one-sided and ultimately untenable. Having chosen Heidegger as the key motif for a paper on anthropology and humanism, Derrida endorses Heidegger's claim that conventional humanist

<sup>6</sup> These conversations are collected in Beaufret (1973a, 1973b, 1974, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> The 1952 meeting took place in Freiburg. Heidegger then travelled to Paris in 1955 for a conference that was organised by Beaufret but by then the politics of Heidegger's reception in France had become too complicated and Sartre did not take part in that conference.

<sup>8</sup> It is still common, of course, to read Sartre and Heidegger as existentialist thinkers who sit together as travelling companions (Blackham 1961, Marino 2004, Theunissen 1985). Here, however, I am interested in their different conceptions of humanism. See Janicaud (1996: 41–9) for a comparison between Sartre and Heidegger's existentialism where their main difference lies in the former's interest in politics and the latter's at least explicit apoliticism.

<sup>9</sup> See note 1, and also Bourdieu (1991), Deleuze and Guattari (1995) and Lyotard (1990).

perspectives are fundamentally flawed. Derrida then tries to work out the implications of Heidegger's 'higher' form of humanism and, in so doing, he elaborates on the philosophical position of the idea of 'man'. Writing in 1968, Derrida makes a great deal of the political circumstances surrounding his text at the same time as he wholly avoids those that Heidegger had to confront while preparing his own. As he tries to isolate politics from the rest of Heidegger's philosophy, Derrida then mounts a highly sophisticated, though to my mind unsuccessful rescue operation of Heidegger's humanism – the consequences of which are still very much present with us (Wood 1993).

## I

*Existentialism Is a Humanism* is primarily devoted to the delimitation of Sartre's branch of existentialism and its ability to make a practical contribution to France and Europe's reconstruction immediately after the Second World War. Humanism was neither a unified outlook nor carried unqualified support at that time, but Sartre's first aim was to reject the notion that his philosophy, the idea of nothingness included, was in fact a form of anti-humanism. Sartre's idea of nothingness works as a form of immanent critique of 'human reality' so that we are able to *creatively imagine a different world*. Far from being the source of philosophical nihilism, Sartre contends that his idea of nothingness is centrally defined through its relation to human freedom: '[f]reedom is precisely the nothingness which is *made-to-be* at the heart of man and which forces human-reality to *make itself* instead of *to be*' (Sartre 1957: 440). Humanism is the ethical point of reference for this lecture because it accounts for the practical and ultimately political justifications of his philosophy.

In *Existentialism*, Sartre is at pains to reject the common charge against the individualistic bias of his philosophy. This criticism centred on two main issues: first, and this is the core of Heidegger's critique later on, Sartre's insistence in subjectivity is interpreted as a dogmatic resistance to break free from Cartesianism and its anthropocentrism; second, as advanced primarily by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre's inability to conceptualise classes as collective actors in their own right (Aronson 1980: 243–86, Soper 1986: 60–74). Communists and Catholics shared a common target in criticising the 'subjectivism' that they regarded as central to existentialist philosophy, but this is a gambit that Sartre (2007: 20) readily accepts: 'subjectivity must be our point of departure' because, rightly understood, subjectivity implies rather than negates our relationships with others. The problem, Sartre contends, lies in the fact that critics have misunderstood what subjectivity actually is

and existentialist philosophy needs to put *them* right: communists reduce subjectivity merely to its *individualistic* connotations, while Catholics see subjectivity as just another name for historicism, cultural relativism or even nihilism. Against both, Sartre argues that individuality is inseparable from our relationships with the human species as a whole: ‘man finds himself in a complex social situation in which he himself is committed and by his choices commits all mankind’ (2007: 45). His notion of subjectivity is not seen as exclusively individual but presupposes sociality and collective action. Humans, Sartre contends, are *immediately* thrust in a world of ‘intersubjectivity’ (2007: 42). Writing in the decisionist language of ‘choices’, Sartre defends the idea that individualism is a collective achievement that finds its normative purchase in the idea of freedom: ‘I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another. The other is essential to my existence . . . my intimate discovery of myself is at the same time a revelation of the other *as a freedom that confronts my own*’ (2007: 41–2, my italics). Quite rightly, his argument is that no form of modern thinking is worth its salt if it fails to uphold to a strong idea of subjectivity. Indeed, Sartre (1995: 82) correctly warns against the possible essentialism of ‘group error’ that thinks it can do without subjectivity and individuality: this is what allows some to speak of ‘the Germans’, ‘the French’ and indeed ‘the Jews’ as homogeneous units.<sup>10</sup> With regard to the objection of relativism, Sartre discusses it on two fronts. On the one hand, he rejects any ‘reference to a given and immutable human nature’ and speaks rather of ‘the human condition’ (2007: 29, 42). Values do not derive their authority from human nature nor can they appeal to any form of non-human authority: human freedom alone is ‘the foundation of all values’ (2007: 48).<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Sartre needs to offer an alternative to secure the foundation of values in order to overcome relativism. This, he again contends, can only take the form of an idea of human freedom that becomes universally binding for humanity as a whole. A dialectics between individual freedom and the general freedom of the human species frames his approach: we ‘will freedom for freedom’s sake through our individual circumstances. And in thus willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that the freedom of others depends on our own’ (2007: 48).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> As we have mentioned already, Sartre did not live up to his own critical stance against group error in his political writings. See note 3.

<sup>11</sup> An argument that we will also encounter in Chapter 2 on Hannah Arendt, it remains an open question whether this claim to have replaced an ‘essential’ idea of human nature with a ‘historical’ notion of ‘human condition’ proves ultimately meaningful.

<sup>12</sup> Iris Murdoch (1976: 34) emphasises instead the non-conformist aspect of Sartre’s idea of individuality: ‘[i]t is on the lonely awareness of the individual and not on the individual’s

Having rejected the accusations of anti-humanism at the very start of the lecture, Sartre comes to the question of what humanism actually is only towards the end of his piece. There, he argues that existentialism and humanism share a common origin that is to be traced back to the enlightenment in the eighteenth century; more precisely, they share the realisation that, now that religious justifications of moral values have become problematic, only human beings can create values for themselves: indeed, they cannot but do so. Sartre then distinguishes between two different meanings of the term humanism – and this is an analytical move that we will find repeated countless times in the literature. There is a first type of humanism, which Sartre rejects, because it is ‘a theory that takes man as an end and as the supreme value’ (2007: 51). This form of humanism takes pride in the *collective* accomplishments of the human species – for instance, its legal institutions, works of art or technological innovations – and then invites *individual* human beings to partake in this admiration for what the best among humans have been able to achieve through the ages. Sartre describes this humanism as a ‘cult of humanity’ and rejects it as a form of essentialism and reification: one can ‘never consider man as an end, because man is constantly in the making’ (2007: 52). An argument that we will also find in Chapter 2, at least part of the question is whether, by claiming that we treat humans only as ends and never as means, the Kantian tradition has implicitly adopted within its moral thinking the utilitarianism that it thought to leave behind. Sartre rejects here a notion of the human that is based on a fixed, ahistorical essence: any idea that points towards the *finitude* of man can only lead to its hypostatisation and, eventually, to its devaluation – and this is again something that we will encounter below as we assess the tension between *telos* and *finis* in Derrida’s argument. But arguably the most consequential implication of this argument connects us to the core of Heidegger’s critique of humanism. While Sartre rejects *this type of humanism because of its elitism*, elitism is a key theme in Heidegger’s recovery of humanism. To Sartre, the glorification of the accomplishments of the few cannot be used to justify passive admiration on behalf of the many because this opens the door for the ultimate devaluation of those who are not deemed capable of reaching such heights. Sartre rejects this false ‘Comteian humanism’ because it ‘leads ultimately . . . to Fascism’ (2007: 52).

Having rejected spurious ideas of human essence that can be turned into objects of demonic worship as well as ideas of the genius that elevate the chosen few over the many, Sartre now delineates the humanism to

integration with his society that his attention centres. In Sartre’s world rational awareness is in inverse ratio to social integration; as soon as his characters *begin to reflect* they detach themselves from their background’ (my italics). See also Chapters 2 and 7.

which he is positively committed. This he defines through an idea of *human transcendence*: ‘man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realised . . . it is in pursuing transcendental goals that he is able to exist’ (2007: 52). This appeal to transcendental relations and goals implies no deity or metaphysical cosmology, says Sartre, but points instead to an idea of ‘liberation’ that is defined in terms of human beings’ own *internal transcendence*: ‘man is nothing other than what he makes of himself . . . there is no other legislator than himself’ (2007: 22, 53). Sartre’s humanism centres on the human capacity for self-legislation: a genuinely human life is above all based on this *creative capacity*, and thus the idea of imagination becomes a fundamental anthropological feature for Sartre. Sartre contends that this type of humanism demands a form of realism that gives humans no place to hide, for instance, from their own selfish motivations and ideological delusions: existentialism is a humanism because it demands that humans take full responsibility for who they are, for the way they behave and for the commitments they make. Existentialism makes it clear that the price to be paid for the realisation of this responsibility is a (Kierkegaardian) ‘anguish’ for the consequences of our decisions and also a (Heideggerian) sense of ‘abandonment’ (2007: 25–7, 34). Sartre’s humanism then favours creativity, imagination and self-transcendence while it accepts the existential responsibility that comes with having to make these choices.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of his debt to Heidegger, there is no question that Sartre felt a strong affinity with some of his theses and, above all, he was taken by Heidegger’s ability to offer a new language for a world that was undergoing dramatic change.<sup>14</sup> Heidegger figures centrally in *Being and Nothingness* and, in the *Existentialism* lecture, Sartre echoes Heidegger’s call for commitment, seizing the truth, and decision (2007: 36, 40). Crucially, Sartre resorts to the French rendition of *Dasein* as ‘human existence’ which, as we will see below, was the standard *anthropological* reading of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* that was prevalent in France at the

<sup>13</sup> See Ishiguro (1971) for an account of Sartre’s idea of imagination and Keefe (1988: 84–5) for an assessment of the Kantian root of Sartre’s position in the *Existentialism* lecture. ‘Imagination’ vs ‘thrownness’ is the way in which Peter Gordon (2012: 136–214) has reconstructed the radically different anthropologies that underpin Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger’s positions during their Davos debate in 1929. If that is the case, then although in language Sartre seems closer to Heidegger, his egalitarian idea of freedom moves him closer to Cassirer’s neo-Kantianism. See Taylor (1985a: 29–35) for a critique of Sartre’s language of ‘radical choices’ – to which he opposes his own idea of strong evaluations. I come back to this in Chapter 6.

<sup>14</sup> In relation to *Nausea*, Ronald Hayman makes the point that I think holds more generally: ‘Sartre was not merely popularizing the ideas of Heidegger, he was *dramatizing* them’ (1986: 99, my italics; see also 187–9).

time (this is the very interpretation that Heidegger will forcefully reject a year later in *Letter*). Sartre's interpretation of Heidegger is that of a humanist philosophy and is based on the ambiguities that *can* be found in *Being and Time* with regard to the relationships between man, being and *Dasein*: to this generation of writers, Heidegger was not and could not have been a Nazi sympathiser *because* he was an existentialist. Crucially, however, as we will see in detail below, *Letter* makes impossible to continue reading Heidegger along rationalist, egalitarian or conventionally humanist lines: Heidegger says no to an anthropological reading of his earlier work and rejects the idea that his branch of existentialism belongs to the Western philosophical canon that culminates in the Enlightenment.

In fact, Heidegger's relationship with Nazism was to cause problems to Sartre's political credentials before, during and indeed also after the war (Cohen-Solal 1991: 141–2, 187, 194, 221). On occasions, Sartre saw this as a strategy of delegitimisation by association and resorted to what have since become common counter-arguments: the idea that there was no systematic link between Heidegger's politics and his philosophy and also that, although the man himself may have been a coward as he caved into Nazi pressures (not a minor charge for a 'decisionist' philosopher), personal traits are of no genuine philosophical implication. Sartre was not alone in failing to appreciate the connections between the irrationalism of Heidegger's philosophy and the authoritarianism of his politics – not least as he knew about Heidegger's politics as early as 1934 (Birchall 2004: 19–22). To his credit, on the other hand, Sartre did not avoid the issue and played a key role in setting up a first wave of debate on the relationship between Heidegger's philosophy and politics. *Les Temps Modernes*, the journal Sartre co-founded and co-edited, published among his early issues of 1946 and 1947 several articles that explicitly addressed the question of Heidegger's politics.<sup>15</sup>

In *Existentialism*, Sartre used Heidegger in order to criticise lofty ideals that remained separated out from actual historical reality: 'I cannot count on men whom I do not know based on faith in the goodness of humanity' (2007: 35). Heidegger's key term 'authenticity' appears later in the text, twice on the same page, and is referred to positively because it points to the notion of total freedom that existentialism favours (2007: 49). And indeed Sartre's (2007: 20) famous dictum that existence precedes essence is taken literally from Heidegger's (1997: 68) preliminary delimitation of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*.<sup>16</sup> But as one reads through the final sections of

<sup>15</sup> The best known of these articles is Karl Löwith's piece on the political implications of Heidegger's ontology. There are two versions of this piece in English, see Karl Löwith (1991, 1995: 211–25).

<sup>16</sup> In *Letter*, however, Heidegger (1993a: 232–7) will judge this interpretation wholly mistaken and even alien to his intentions.

*Being and Nothingness* that concentrate on the positive articulation of an idea of freedom, it becomes increasingly clear that there are also major differences between both projects. There, Sartre claims that the major shortcoming of Heidegger's work lies in the fact *Being and Time* fundamentally lacks an ethical dimension. Sartre had dressed his argument up in Heideggerian rhetoric but his ultimate point is very much the opposite of Heidegger's: 'freedom is not a being; it is *the being of man*' (Sartre 1957: 441). Sartre's idea of freedom is not devoid of difficulties, not least as he insists that even under extreme duress the individual remains free to choose. And Sartre himself conceded that his anti-establishment sensibility during the war allowed for 'a vague nostalgia of fascism' in some of his own writing. But it is the constant return to an egalitarian idea of freedom that led Sartre to 'employ Heidegger's work *against* fascist totalitarianism' (Kleinberg 2003: 132–3, my italics).

Another way of making a similar argument would be to show that, although the decisionist language that favours commitment over justification is not difficult to find in *Existentialism*, Sartre never suggests that decisions are to be taken beyond the realm of rational argument. For instance, there is more than a Kantian echo in Sartre's argument that the idea of the individual cannot be understood outside notions of human freedom and responsibility. It is on this basis that Sartre then connects the particular and the universal: human responsibility is 'much greater than we might have supposed, because it concerns all mankind . . . In choosing myself, I choose man' (2007: 24–5). His resort to the idea of freedom is a way to come out of moral paralysis and the argument here depends on an insight that is altogether alien to Heidegger; namely, an idea of freedom that is fundamentally connected to the Kantian dictum that 'freedom wills itself and the freedom of others' (2007: 49). In so far as an idea of human dignity underpins the existentialism which he advocates, Sartre's humanism is fundamentally tied to an *anthropocentric perspective*: 'man is nothing other than what he makes of himself' (2007: 22). Kant is criticised because of the risk of essentialising human ends that we discussed above, and also because his ethical principles are 'too abstract' and therefore 'fail to define action'; and yet Sartre commits to the universalistic and egalitarian thrust of this idea of freedom (2007: 49).<sup>17</sup> For instance, Sartre's universalistic commitments allow him to advance a strong notion of universal, rather than sociocultural, empathy:

<sup>17</sup> Kantian themes of this kind are also central to Sartre's argument on the liberating role of literature in his *What Is Literature?* (see Sartre 1978, Aronson 1980: 149–50). Quite rightly, Soper (1986: 61) contends that Sartre could not have endorsed Heidegger's idea that being and man do look for each other because this would have undermined any fully-fledged notion of *human* freedom. See Sartre (1957: 433–81).

[H]uman universality exists, but it is not a given; it is in perpetual construction ... I construct it by understanding every other man's project, regardless of the era in which he lives ... The fundamental aim of existentialism is to reveal the link between the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realizes himself in realizing a type of humanity – and a commitment that is always understandable, by anyone in any era – and the relativity of the culture ensemble that may result from such a choice. (2007: 43)

An idea of universal empathy is something that ought to be refined and retained; it is essential if the social and political sciences are to remain open to genuine sociocultural and normative dialogue.<sup>18</sup> The idea of universal empathy works because, as members of the same human species, there are some needs and capabilities that apply to us all: we can and indeed do experience inter- and trans-cultural sympathy on such key experiences as grief, pain, love, fear, admiration and happiness. This universalism is incompatible with elitism or cultural essentialism: the idea of human dignity only makes sense on the basis of a strong commitment to the egalitarianism of a universalistic principle of humanity.

A theme that will accompany us throughout this book, Sartre does not distinguish clearly between *normative* ideas of humanity – the *humanism* that sees humans as possessors of a fundamental dignity – and *cognitive* notions of human authorship, that is, the *anthropocentrism* that focuses on humans' mastery of the world. Because humans are *not* surrounded *only* by an environment that is made by humans themselves, Sartre is wrong when he claims that we are nothing but what we make of ourselves: we of course live as members of the natural world, we are in possession of a human body and there are social, cultural and technological structures that present themselves as alien to humans themselves. The challenge that remains is whether and how Sartre's humanism can be separated out from the more contentious implications of his anthropocentrism; namely, whether humans are to be treated as the ultimate standard against which everything in the world is to be measured. Indeed, Sartre elides the principle of human authorship, the idea of universal empathy *and* the anthropocentric notion of humans as the ultimate standard: '[e]verything happens to every man as if the entire human race were staring at him and *measuring itself by what he does*' (2007: 26, my italics). We rather need a clear separation between humanism and anthropocentrism, between the key normative idea of *human dignity* and an

<sup>18</sup> Sartre makes this point explicitly as a critique of Eurocentrism when he refers to our mutual understanding with a 'Chinese, Indian or black African: There is universality in every project, inasmuch as any man is capable of understanding any human project' (1978: 43). I have argued elsewhere that this is a key idea that transpires from the best tradition of sociology and social theory (Chernilo 2007a: 25–32, 2014).

inflated notion of *human authorship*. On the one hand, the proposition on the intrinsic value of human beings qua human beings *underpins* our understanding that social and cultural institutions are the product of human action itself; on the other hand, we should not translate this into an *anthropocentric* proposition that is deeply mistaken: humans are *not* the measure of all things, the cosmos is not organised for the benefit of humans and the natural environment is self-sustaining vis-à-vis human intervention.<sup>19</sup> We can follow neither Sartre's uncritical anthropocentrism nor Heidegger's rejection of humanism here: instead, we need to separate out the normative value of *humanism* from the reductionist implications of *anthropocentrism*; indeed we then require the former to inform our critique of the latter.

Another critical feature of *Existentialism* is whether humanism necessarily becomes a form of foundationalism and we have seen that Sartre consistently tries to unite opposites: 'there is no difference between free being – being as a project, being as existence choosing its essence – and absolute being. Nor is there any difference between being as an absolute temporarily localized – that is, localized in history – and universally intelligible being' (Sartre 2007: 43–4). At stake here is a *logic of reconciliation* that systematically tries to bring together the individual and the collective, the subjective and the objective, the immanent and the transcendental, the historical and the general, the particular and the universal.<sup>20</sup> In Sartre, humanism becomes a form of foundationalism because our approval or rejection of it is ultimately made to depend *on a question of principle*: ontologically, whether reconciliation is an adequate doctrine of being in general (and of human beings in particular); historically, whether reconciliation awaits at the end of history (an idea of progress that helps us explain temporary distortions, deformations and even aberrations); normatively, whether reconciliation is the highest human value of them all. Sartre's commitment to this logic of reconciliation makes his ultimate position untenable but the argument can be made that this is already a result of his previous conflation between humanism and anthropocentrism. Indeed,

<sup>19</sup> First published in 1938, Gaston Bachelard's (2002) *La Formation de L'Esprit Scientifique* suggests that anthropocentrism was one key 'epistemological obstacle' that had to be overcome for modern science to emerge: the universe neither exists nor works for human benefit. Foucault, Derrida and Althusser all figure among Bachelard's former students and to that extent we may interpret their critique of *humanism* as an expression of this rejection of *anthropocentrism*. In sociology, this argument has been taken up by Niklas Luhmann's (2012: 5–13) rendition of our discipline's own epistemological obstacles (see Mascareño and Chernilo 2009 for further discussion). As I will argue at the end of this chapter, humanism and anthropocentrism need to be clearly distinguished. See also the book's Epilogue.

<sup>20</sup> On this, see also Michael Walzer's (1995: xvii–xx) critique of Sartre in *Anti-Semite and Jew*.

as we saw in the Introduction, most contemporary rejections of conventional humanism seem to hang on this weakness as they elaborate on the dystopian prevalence of symbolic and material violence in modern times. But what we really need is to question the logic that makes it difficult to distinguish humanism from anthropocentrism. It is the dual charge of subjectivism and foundationalism that mortally wounds Sartre's project: but while the former ought to be retained on the humanist grounds of an egalitarian conception of freedom, the latter is to be rejected as the arrogant expression of our specie's exclusive concern with ourselves.

Let me conclude this section by briefly mentioning three topics that shall prove central to later debates on humanism but which do not figure centrally in Sartre's argument. First, we have seen that Sartre's position is wholeheartedly atheistic. But to the extent that humanism centres on the question of human *dignity*, it can easily abandon the anthropocentric requirement of human authorship and be made compatible with various forms of religious arguments. Somewhat paradoxically, then, humanism has become increasingly close to religious convictions about the 'sanctity' of human life. Second, Sartre does not really discuss questions of inhumanity and even anti-humanism; there is no real engagement with the argument that social practices, themselves a product of human action, may be constitutively unable to bring about the reconciliatory motifs of humanism (Lyotard 1993). The third and final theme that does not appear in the text, but which figures highly in subsequent discussions, is that of technology. From the alleged neutrality of modern technology to its being a source of alienation, technological innovations matter because they redefine our humanity by interfering *directly* on the relationships between culture and nature, between humanity and society. Whether this is a challenge to the logic of reconciliation of humanism, or it is rather that technologies themselves become an instrument in renewing our hopes for future human reconciliation, remains open to debate. Either way, questions about technology continue to inform anthropological debates that seek to understand the human.

## II

We have said that Heidegger wrote his *Letter on Humanism* soon after the end of the war and as a request from French philosopher, Jean Beaufret. Living under French-occupied Germany and unsure about his future, Heidegger had every reason to welcome various exchanges with French

officials and philosophers at the time. *Letter* was indeed first published in French in 1947.<sup>21</sup>

American philosopher Tom Rockmore has devoted several works to explore the history of Heidegger's reception in France (1992, 1995, 2009). He argues that we see its development in three waves. A first, humanist, interpretation was advanced by Alexandre Koyré, Alexander Kojeve and Sartre himself in the 1930s and 1940s. As apparent in our discussion in the previous section, Heidegger was being read here as fully belonging in the humanist tradition; he was a philosopher who sought to *rejuvenate* the venerable humanist tradition that in the meantime had lost touch with the realities of modern society. Crucially, Heidegger's original approach was being interpreted as an attempt to develop a genuine philosophical anthropology – not least through the rendition of his notion of *Dasein* as *human reality*. A second wave of reception developed between the late 1940s and the mid 1980s.<sup>22</sup> Originally advanced by Jean Beaufret and eventually by such leading figures as Derrida himself, *Letter* becomes the key text that allowed them to directly challenge this anthropological reading. In their view, the question was to show that Heidegger's philosophy sought to overcome traditional humanism and, without turning into an apology for anti-humanism, the project was to offer a new, allegedly higher, version of humanism itself. Also, and given that details about Heidegger's political past continued to emerge throughout this period, this second wave of reception had to face the question of the relationships between politics and philosophy in Heidegger's work. The standard view was here that the two had to be separated out, and several claims were put forward to explain away their interconnections: Heidegger's actions as rector were a strategic move to protect academic freedoms and the autonomy of the university against Nazi intervention; his endorsement of Nazism was genuine but short-lived, and it expressed nothing different from the various forms of 'radicalism' to which scholars of all persuasions felt attraction during the convoluted politics of the twentieth century; his behaviour was a mere expression of political immaturity, naivety or even cowardice for a philosopher who had until then remained wholly apolitical. Ultimately, however, it became impossible to deny that his politics had *some* connection to his philosophy,

<sup>21</sup> The main instigator of this rapprochement with Heidegger was the French military attaché Frédéric de Towarnicki, who tried but failed to secure a visa for Sartre and de Beauvoir to visit Heidegger in 1946. It is in this context that Jean Beaufret came into contact with Towarnicki and was eventually allowed to visit Heidegger, for the first time, even before the end of the war (Kleinberg 2003: 162–8).

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, already in 1959 Habermas had argued that Heidegger's influence in Germany was a 'reimport' from France (1985: 57). On general context, see also Cohen (2006) and Sluga (1993).

but the argument remained that this was *ultimately* inconsequential at the most fundamental intellectual level.<sup>23</sup>

A third wave of debate started in the 1980s and was triggered by the publication of Victor Farias's (1989) book *Heidegger and Nazism*. The merits of this publication have been the subject of heated discussion, but since its appearance it has become necessary to engage explicitly with the politics of Heidegger's work as part of a general reassessment of his philosophy. For a sociological audience, Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) book on Heidegger offers a good case in point. First published in 1975, Bourdieu reworked his text and republished it in 1988 in the context of the contentious reception of Farias's work. Bourdieu systematically applies his concepts of field, habitus and symbolic violence in order to explain Heidegger's philosophical and political outlook. For instance, Bourdieu treats *Letter* as a paradigmatic case in which an author seeks to authoritatively adjudicate between competing readings of his previous work in order to impose the canon that is to rule over future interpretations (1991: 90–4). *Letter* was expected to make it impossible to continue reading Heidegger alongside rationalist or humanist lines because Heidegger blames *them* for the rise of Nazism: Heidegger's critique of humanism is the critique of modern anthropocentrism gone mad. Bourdieu also reflects on a certain isomorphism between the philosophical and the political fields and shows that Heidegger sought to establish a new path in both arenas: his philosophy sought to offer a third way in between Marxism and neo-Kantianism as much as his political endorsement of Nazism is to be seen as a third way in between the Soviet revolution and bourgeois democracy (1991: 57–67).<sup>24</sup>

Beyond Bourdieu, the net result of this third wave of reception is that it is no longer tenable to suggest that we are only talking of a short period of time in which Heidegger was caught up in the irrational mood of its time or that, because he soon realised that it was all a terrible mistake, there is nothing philosophically consequential about his actions during the 1930s. The publication of a recent book by Emmanuel Faye (2009) has in fact led Rockmore to suggest that we have entered a fourth wave in which Heidegger's political Nazism needs to be seen as integral to his philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Faye's research

<sup>23</sup> Apart from Derrida's position, these arguments can also be found in Deleuze and Guattari (1995), Gadamer (1992) and Lyotard (1990). See Grassi (1983, 1988) for a general discussion of Heidegger's understanding of humanism.

<sup>24</sup> Far more problematic, however, is the sociological reductionism through which Bourdieu explains the differences between Sartre and Heidegger in relation to differences in their lower middle-class habitus (1991: 131).

<sup>25</sup> In this context, Rockmore (2009: x–xiii) also comments on new evidence that connects Beaufret with the French branch of Holocaust deniers. On this periodisation of Heidegger's reception in France, see also Kleinberg (2003: 205).

demonstrates that Heidegger showed genuine zeal and initiative in his actions as rector, that he wrote and lectured extensively on Fascism and Nazi ideology both *before and after* 1933, and that he explicitly sought to connect philosophical reflection and political action throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Faye's claim is that Heidegger was both a highly talented and a wholly unreconstructed organic intellectual who openly endorsed Fascism since the early 1920s: this political commitment pre-dates the publication of *Being and Time*. This book then needs to be reread as the philosophical articulation of his own version of right-wing conservatism that belongs to the intellectual anti-intellectualism that was already popular in Germany at the time – what Adorno (2003: 1, 43) later called the *jargon of authenticity*. The ultimate philosophical scandal is not Heidegger's Nazi sympathies but his continuous lack of reflection on the victims of the war and of Nazi policies (Caputo 1992).<sup>26</sup>

Credit must then be given to Karl Löwith, who saw it all quite clearly already in 1946: while Heidegger's political endorsement of Nazism in particular was contingent upon its success as a mass movement in 1920s Germany, Heidegger's *philosophical* edifice was explicitly in tune with the idea that, given the general decay of contemporary society, there was a demand to seize any opportunity for historical renewal: elitism, irrationalism, authenticity, historicity, collectivism and resoluteness are all central to Heidegger's work both politically and philosophically: 'Heidegger did not "misunderstand himself" when he supported Hitler; on the contrary, anyone who did not comprehend how he could do this did not understand him' (Löwith 1995: 223). Heidegger's critique of humanism then matters because he explicitly rejected any form of universalistic orientation in the form of egalitarianism, rationalism or subjectivity. As we will see below, Heidegger inaugurates an argument that is now ubiquitous in the literature: he *blames* the humanism of Western metaphysics for the contemporary crises of modern society.

Philosophically, as said, *Letter* was meant to be both a clarification of Heidegger's own thinking with regard to the anthropological interpretation of *Being and Time* and a rejoinder to Sartre's *Existentialism* lecture

<sup>26</sup> On Heidegger's early enthusiasm for the regime and its wars, see Faye (2009), Safranski (1998) and Losurdo (1992). By the mid 1950s Heidegger could still pen that, apart from Germany now being 'cut in two', the Second World War 'has decided nothing' in terms of 'man's essential fate on this earth'; rather the opposite, 'only the things that have remained *undecided* stand out somewhat more clearly' (2004: 66, my italics). Heidegger never really accounted for his actions at the time – let alone apologised for them. The interview Heidegger gave to *Der Spiegel* in 1966, and that was published posthumously in 1976, is usually cited as the one instance in which this silence is broken – although it produced no hint of self-criticism and the only embarrassment that is forthcoming belongs to the interviewees as *they* apologised to Heidegger for raising uncomfortable questions (1991b). The theme of Heidegger's lack of apology is analysed in Kisiel (1992). See also Chapter 2.

that had just been published. Maybe unsurprisingly, Heidegger challenges the terms of the invitation to reflect on humanism because the very question already ‘contains an admission that this word has lost its meaning’ (1993a: 247). Early in the text, Heidegger makes clear the key move that inspires what will follow: ‘is the *damage* caused by all such terms still not sufficiently obvious?’ (1993a: 219, my italics): Humanism is dead but rather than feeling sorry for this loss we must rather engage in a ‘radical’ reinterpretation of its presuppositions and implications.

Similar to what Sartre does in *Existentialism*, Letter also offers first a critique and then a redefinition of humanism. Heidegger shows no mercy towards Sartre, however, who is criticised for having shown no understanding of Heidegger’s genuine position. Sartre’s philosophy is depicted as fully belonging to the kind of metaphysics that must be rejected and abandoned, and the damage of humanism is defined by its endorsement of the ‘metaphysics of subjectivity’ that defines modern times (1993a: 222–37). Humanism is subjectivism because it focuses on the narrow, particularistic point of view of man and, in so doing, it renounces to grasp the ultimate essence of being: humanism sides with the subjectivity with the *anthropos* and, in so doing, it rejects the pursuit of the fundamental determinations of being in general.<sup>27</sup> Heidegger accepts that ideas of humanism vary depending on how claims for it are introduced, so that different forms of humanism will develop based on how they justify a ‘conception of the “freedom” and “nature” of man’ (1993a: 225). Humanism is not only a form of subjectivism but also a form of relativism and even nihilism because it leaves humans ‘free’ to do as they please; Heidegger rejects humanism because it encapsulates everything that in his view is wrong in Western metaphysics from Plato to Nietzsche (Löwith 1995: 36, 55–60, 97).<sup>28</sup>

Heidegger argues that if we accept his thesis that we need to depart from humanism, we need also to accept its consequences and reject also all forms of anthropocentrism. Modern society has however moved in the opposite direction and is ever more dependent on the idea that ‘civilization and culture’ are only ‘vindicated . . . for the sake of man’ (1993a: 233). Humanism remains the dogmatic expression of Western metaphysics after all its previous idols have gone, and Heidegger compares Marx’s materialist humanism, Sartre’s existentialist humanism and Christianity’s religious humanism in order to show that, although they are different in

<sup>27</sup> Given that I am trying to demystify its irrationalism and mysticism, I will not follow the convention of writing ‘Being’ with capital B. I will do so only for direct quotations.

<sup>28</sup> Levinas (2006: 47) is right when he claims that, in Heidegger, the critique of humanism and metaphysics are one and the same: ‘[e]very humanism is either grounded in metaphysics or is itself made to be the ground for one’.

‘purpose and principle’, this makes little substantive difference because they are all equally based on subjectivism, on the one hand, and on a reductionist account of the human, on the other. All these humanisms are problematic because they share the view ‘that the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* is determined with regard to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world’ (1993a: 225). At face value at least, Heidegger seems to be aiming at a certain *decentring of humanism*, something we may describe as an *anti-anthropocentric form of humanism*:

what is peculiar to all metaphysics, specifically with respect to the way the essence of man is determined, is that it is “humanistic”. Accordingly, every humanism remains metaphysical. In defining the humanity of man humanism not only does not ask about the relation of Being to the essence of man; because of its metaphysical origin *humanism even impedes the question* by neither recognizing it nor understanding it. (1993a: 226, my italics)

In Heidegger’s argument, then, the failure of humanism is threefold. First, instead of a strong sense of the human, humanism offers nothing other than subjectivism and nihilism. Humanism is unable to live up to its promises; indeed, it is responsible for the irresponsibility that ensues in endorsing human self-determination. Second, this subjectivism claims to be self-positing but requires, instead, the external justifications that nature, history or god can provide. Humanism fails to deliver on its most essential commitments of making human life dependent on the autonomy of the will. Third, this subjectivism makes it impossible to reach an understanding of being as the genuine source of dignity of all forms of human experience. The subjectivist metaphysics of humanism presupposes rather than genuinely explores where the humanity of human beings ultimately lies and, as it blocks our vision of *ultimate* questions, these can only re-emerge through a radical critique of humanism itself. In dogmatically asserting a metaphysical idea of man, humanism *contributes* to the devaluation of humanity and, because it concentrates on the subjectivity of the anthropos, it becomes *responsible* for humans’ inability to see beyond themselves.

Heidegger takes issue with the alleged devaluation of the human that was now prevalent in philosophical anthropology: true humanism must stop looking at what humans *share* with other living species as much as it must stop looking inwardly in the direction of subjectivity itself; rather, it ought to concentrate on what lies *above* traditional ideas of humanity. Philosophical anthropology, as the latest expression of Western metaphysics, is deeply flawed because it ‘thinks of man on the basis of *animalitas* and does not think in the direction of *humanitas*. Metaphysics closes itself to the simple essential fact that man essentially occurs only in his essence, where

he is claimed by Being' (1993a: 227, underlining mine). Philosophical anthropology may claim to be rational, philosophically informed and scientifically sound and yet it fails because it continues to define the human the wrong way round:

All anthropology continues to be dominated by the idea that man is an organism. Philosophical anthropology as well as scientific anthropology will *not* use man's essential nature as the starting point for their definition of man.

If we are to think of man not as an organism but a *human* being, we must first give attention to the fact that man is that being who has his being by pointing to what is ... Man is the being who is in that he points toward "Being," and who can be himself only as he always and everywhere refers himself to what is. (2004: 148–9)

The humanity of human beings is to be defined through an essential notion of being because only thus may man be able to raise genuinely fundamental questions. Western metaphysics fails because it does not 'ask in what way *the essence of man belongs to the truth of Being*' (1993a: 226, my italics).

In Karl Löwith's (1995: 39–48, 56–63, 78) interpretation, it is this question of the relationship between humans and being that is *the* fundamental question of Heidegger's philosophy in its entirety. As we just saw, the predominant interpretation in France at the time of publication of *Letter*, the one on which Sartre draws, was to read Heidegger's argument as supportive of anthropological humanism. But this is precisely the interpretation that Heidegger now explicitly dismisses: if in *Being and Time* the idea of *Dasein* could be reconstructed as the mediating point at which man and being *relate* to one and another – *Dasein* allows man and being to become co-constitutive (1997: 71–5) – the arguments have now definitively shifted and being is to preside over man. In his nuanced analysis of this argument, for instance, Michel Haar (1993: 57–63, 111–16) speaks of the 'false symmetry' between man and being in Heidegger's work: man is depicted through such notions as 'passivity' and 'radical receptivity' and its key anthropological attributes become those of obedience, submission, destiny and response to the demands of being. If we then try to offer a definition of being in Heidegger, the first thing to say is that already in *Being and Time* he had opened with the proposition that being wholly defies a positive definition: not only does 'the question of Being lacks an *answer* ... the question itself is obscure and without direction' (1997: 24). You do not actively look for being but let being come to you. In *Letter*, being is now credited with an ability to 'address' man: being 'disposes' and 'determines' man to action; being is able to will, love, need, desire; being alone is capable of freedom. The question is whether the modalities

through which being will make itself available, visible, to man (Haar 1993: 111–37). Heidegger's being comes close to Hegel's absolute spirit, Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, or even ideas of providence or divinity that are defined through a negative anthropology: that which man is not. But what differentiates his argument from those of Hegel or Nietzsche is the fact that being is defined not only elusively as 'mystery', 'simplicity' or 'enigma' but also as 'withdrawal', 'concealment', 'abandonment', 'absence', 'hiding', 'errancy' and even 'distress': man is a 'sign', a 'pointer' a 'bridge' to being (2004: 9, 60).<sup>29</sup> The negative anthropology that thus ensues is explicitly devised to understand man as *lacking* in genuine creative powers, reflexivity, interiority, subjectivity or autonomy, which allows for the focus on the 'thrownness' of historicity, tradition and authority. This subordination of man to being places the former in a position to receive but never to create authentic meaning. If the aim was to achieve an idea of man that does not fall back to metaphysical subjectivism, this shallow anthropology clearly succeeds because now humans are completely devoid of *any possibility of agency*. Haar (1993: 174–87) concludes that Heidegger moves inconsistently between a wholly historicist understanding of man that depends on language and culture as the 'house of being' and an account of the relationships between man and being that is placed at a pure ontological level as it becomes wholly devoid of any such socio-historical markers: in this second case, being always prevails and subordinates man.<sup>30</sup>

As he elaborates on the fundamental tenets of humanism in the history of Western philosophy, Heidegger criticises the traditional conception of the *animal rationale* because it still conceives our humanity in terms of what we share with beasts: 'Animal means beast. Man is the beast endowed with reason' (2004: 61).<sup>31</sup> Heidegger then distinguishes between this animal rationale and an idea of the human that he himself

<sup>29</sup> Derrida (1982: 131) also uses an idea of mystery that is ultimately beyond philosophy and belongs to poetry: 'Being remains mysterious ... Being ... is nothing, is not a being, cannot be said, cannot say itself, except in the ontic metaphor'.

<sup>30</sup> Haar (1993: 113) summarises his criticism of Heidegger thus: 'there is a radical disproportion between, on the one side, the poverty and basic receptivity of man and, on the other side, the richness and inexhaustible, effusive capacity of being'. In what is otherwise a fantastic book, Haar belongs fully in the second wave of Heidegger interpretations as he sticks to the idea of a complete separation between politics and philosophy. He discusses, for instance, Heidegger's elitist definition of *Volk* and the irrationalism of his notions of 'resoluteness' and 'action', 'death' and 'authenticity', and even 'sacrifice' (1993: 47–50, 91, 122–3, 140–1). Haar then soberly observes that there *is* a general trend in all cases, and that the value of man systematically recedes vis-à-vis the demands of being. He will not however be drawn to comment on the normative implications that may follow from this.

<sup>31</sup> On the role of animals in Heidegger's thinking, see Calarco (2008: 15–53).

recovers from the Roman idea of *humanitas*. A first, positive, definition of humanism is then rearticulated through Heidegger's key notion of care:

Where else does "care" tend but in the direction of bringing man back to his essence? What else does that in turn betoken but that man (*homo*) become human (*humanus*)? Thus *humanitas* really does remain the concern of such thinking. For this is humanism: meditating and caring, that man be human and not inhumane, "inhuman," that is, outside his essence. But in what does the humanity of man consist? It lies in his essence. (1993a: 223–4, underlining mine)

Let us first concentrate on the lower form of humanity, *homo*, which Heidegger defines as that man that is defined through its *animalitas*. The fact that humans share an organic constitution with other living creatures blocks our ability to specify the uniqueness of humanity; this is too base a ground to establish what is essential in our humanity. A form of anthropocentrism that reproduces the traditional dualisms of the metaphysical tradition – the mind and the organism, the body and the soul – Heidegger thought that philosophical anthropology encapsulated everything that is wrong with current attempts at understanding the human. In Heidegger's view, the problem lies in the dualisms themselves rather than in the side that we choose. We cannot overcome metaphysics as long as we retain this way of thinking:

The fact that physiology and physiological chemistry can scientifically investigate man as an organism is no proof that in this "organic" thing, that is, in the body scientifically explained, the essence of man consists . . . Just as little as the essence of man consists in being an animal organism can this insufficient definition of man's essence be overcome or offset by outfitting man with an immortal soul, the power of reason, or the character of a person. In each instance essence is passed over, and passed over on the basis of the same metaphysical projection. (1993a: 228–9)

The apparent goal of Heidegger's humanism is to rescue humans from themselves and their ideas that they are no more than animals; only thus can the essence of *humanitas* be brought back to its essence. But Heidegger's idea of nature deserves closer scrutiny as it connects to his critique of defining the human through our organic constitution. If we look at what the secondary literature tells us, Heidegger's idea of nature is defined in three, apparently contradictory, ways. First, the argument has been made that, because the possibilities of *historical* reconciliation have become fully closed to Heidegger within the realm of human action, this is now being implicitly transferred over to a general idea of being. I will show below that Heidegger's work does resort to a logic of reconciliation, but the question that remains is whether this coheres, even if in spite of itself,

on a pantheistic idea of nature.<sup>32</sup> Second, Heidegger's rejection of naturalism has been presented as evidence of the incompatibility between his philosophy and the 'blood and soil' racism of the Nazis (Pöggeler 1991: 203, Safranski 1998: 236). The question is more complicated, however, because the argument has also been made that, far from opposing blood and soil, Heidegger endorsed this form of *racist naturalism* as a way of rejecting the 'liberal', 'positivist' and indeed 'British' form of biological thinking as represented by Darwin (Faye 2009: 66–74, 87–99). Third, Heidegger's critique of philosophical anthropology is thrown back at his own failure to say anything meaningful about the organic side of human life. The devaluation of the animal in *animal rationale* is seen as consistent with Heidegger's *philosophical* displacement of humanism, but it also leaves him with a wholly incomplete notion of a human being who has no body or physical relation to the world: even if it does not define the essential properties of the human, organic life remains one important dimension of human life as it actually is. The problem lies in Heidegger's own insistence in that he *is* interested in the concreteness of life, and to that extent Hans Jonas surely has a point when he claims that 'Heidegger too failed to bring the statement "I am hungry" within the purview of philosophy' (Jonas 1996: 47).<sup>33</sup>

If we now return to Heidegger's idea of the human that speaks directly to the higher humanity of *humanitas*, we have seen that it centres on 'meditating and caring' about the essence of being. *Humanitas* brings man closer to being; it is a return to the ancient Greek ideal of education, *paideia*, which was indeed the original term that the Romans translated as *humanitas* (1993a: 224). In order to emphasise the fundamentally linguistic character of meditating and caring, *Letter* opens with a claim that has since become one of Heidegger's best-known remarks: '[l]anguage is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. *Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home*' (Heidegger 1993a: 217, my italics). Here, Heidegger pays special homage to Hölderlin, as poets become key to the special breed of humans whose role is to liberate language and bring it closer to what is essential: 'the world's destiny is heralded in poetry, without yet becoming manifest in the history of Being' (1993a: 242).<sup>34</sup> As for the role of philosophy, it may one day get back to

<sup>32</sup> See Cassirer (1996: 200–9), Cohen (2006: xxii–xxiv), Haar (1993: xxx–xxxii), Löwith (1995: 89–91).

<sup>33</sup> See also Haar (1993: 77–85) and Löwith (1970: 311–17).

<sup>34</sup> Even more concisely: 'The thinker says Being. The poet names the holy' (Heidegger, cited in Löwith 1996: 37). See also Heidegger (2004: 10). References to Hölderlin were a common trope in conservative circles at the time as it allowed for a retreat from the monumental to the intimate (Mehring 2014: 34–5). Safranski (1998: 282–88) contends that Heidegger's first

that position of grasping genuine being, but before that can be re-attempted philosophy needs to bring itself back into a position where simplicity, authenticity and mystery of being can be truly grasped. As we will see in some detail in Chapter 2, for Hannah Arendt the question of thinking is fundamentally egalitarian and worldly: thinking is one of our generic human capacities to make sense of the world that surrounds us. Heidegger also contends that thinking is an attribute of human beings because it is 'something that is done by an act of the human spirit' (2004: 127). The commonalities with Arendt end there, however. First, because in Heidegger elitism rather than egalitarianism defines thinking: 'the involvement with thought is in itself a rare thing, reserved for few people' (2004: 126). Second, because he is only interested in *pure* thinking; that is, the kind of thinking that distinguishes genuine philosophical genius and originality because it is concerned only with thinking itself: 'A thinker is not beholden to a thinker – rather, when he is thinking, he holds on to what is to be thought, to Being' (2004: 95).

Contemporary philosophy is in no position to achieve this genuine thinking that Heidegger contends is a precondition for the essential understanding of being. Current philosophy must abandon such metaphysical distinctions as the one between *is* and *ought* because pure thinking 'is neither theoretical nor practical' (1993a: 259). It needs to step down from transcendental principles and move back to history, back to the 'simplicity' of the spoken word whereby 'the essence of thinking' regains control over the 'technical-theoretical exactness of concepts' (1993a: 219). It is through the mastery of language, and indeed of the spoken word, that philosophy will renew itself. On the one hand, this can be read as a move against Husserl's notion that philosophy was to be successful only in so far as it was to become (re-)elevated to the 'rank of a science' (1993a: 218). On the other hand, however, Karl Jaspers saw this emphasis on pure thinking as an expression of the fact that Heidegger never really overcame Husserl's even more fundamental insight that the true task of philosophy is that of finding the Archimedean point of uncontaminated thinking: the only difference is that Heidegger approached this goal through poetry and etymology rather than through a theoretical or technical command

references to Hölderlin take place in the context of his stepping down from his position as rector and getting back to teaching in 1934–5; poetry was now to prove powerful where politics had failed him. According to Pöggeler (1991: 219), moreover, Hölderlin is also a central resource in Heidegger's dreamy references to the connections between German rebirth under the Nazis and Ancient Greece. This was not a passing phase in Heidegger's thinking, however, as similar references to Hölderlin are present in the rectoral address of 1933 as well as in the *Der Spiegel* interview of 1966 (Heidegger 1991a: 31–2, 37–8, 1991b: 109). Even Derrida (1991b: 69) gets eventually tired of this and seems to mock Heidegger's insistence on the 'joint privilege of German and Greek ... with regards to thought'.

of concepts (Safranski 1998: 364–9, 388). Levinas (2006: 18) is again right when he contends that '[f]or Heidegger, being is revealed out of the abstruseness and mystery of the unsaid that poets and philosophers bring to the world without ever saying all'. Heidegger makes thus another move that was to prove crucial for twentieth-century social science and philosophy: from now on 'language dominates the philosopher instead of the philosopher dominating language' (Bourdieu 1991: 101).

Heidegger has distinguished between higher and lower ideas of man and this is key to his argument that although he rejects metaphysical humanism, this does not mean that he favours any form of anti-humanism. His argument is not to be read as if 'it promotes the inhumane and deprecates the dignity of man'; rather the opposite, as we have mentioned, he contends that '[h]umanism is opposed because it does not set the *humanitas* of man high enough' (1993a: 233–4). Heidegger echoes the Nietzschean argument on the transvaluation of values so that, after humans have demoted god, nature and history as a source of value, this devaluation has now come to bite humans themselves: the same process that allows everything to be turned into an object of subjective preference accounts now also for their own devaluation. Anthropocentrism is the current source of this systematic demotion of all values because now things can have a value *only* because man deems that to be the case: 'by the assessment of something as a value what *is valued is admitted only as an object for man's estimation*' (1993a: 251, my italics). But Nietzsche is not really being followed here because, in order to transcend the language of values and the inevitable process of transvaluation, Heidegger *is* after a genuine restoration. He demands a new source of values that lies above and beyond the modern devaluation and this is something that only being can offer: being endows man with value. Man is subordinate and his worthiness depends on how it cares for being; man is not and can never become a source of value. Humans are too mundane and do not reach the essential spheres where being resides: at their absolute best, only the chosen few – thinkers and poets – may be allowed to become the famous 'shepherd of Being' (1993a: 234).<sup>35</sup>

Heidegger blames the near self-destruction of modern humanity on anthropocentrism and argues that the first step forward is to reject the egalitarian rationale that we saw underpins Sartre's and most traditional forms of humanism. This separation between higher and lower forms of humanity allows Heidegger to make egalitarianism the main culprit of modern normative aporias. Heidegger's critique of humanism is then

<sup>35</sup> See Arendt (1978 II: 158–94) for an analysis of Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche. See also Chapter 2.

construed through a dual negation: first, being is to be preferred over the human; second, within humanity itself, higher forms of *humanitas* are to be cared for at the expense of animale rational. This is 1946 and Heidegger knows exactly what he is doing: after having redefined humanism along these lines, he can now state that, through the radical egalitarianism of mass society, humanism is modernity's real totalitarian ideology. The former rector rediscovers the pure thinker inside him and erects himself as the ultimate judge of what makes human beings human: at best, he dismisses nearly everything that most human beings would do throughout their lives as a lower form of humanity; at worst, these become an expression of their very inhumanity. A full-blown elitism is one key normative pillar of Heidegger's humanism; his rejection of *homo humanus* on behalf of *humanitas* is justified because the former is simply unable to 'realize the proper dignity of man' (1993a: 233, my italics).<sup>36</sup>

In fact, Heidegger's argument does not simply depend on elitism being openly preferred over egalitarianism. He contends that elitism is just a moderate price to pay in order to avoid the repetition of the massacres towards which metaphysical humanism will again lead: irrationalism is more sober and less authoritarian than rationality, authenticity and simplicity more genuine than emancipation or self-determination, poetry touches on the essential, while science and technology are merely able to manipulate instruments. Only poetry and contemplative philosophy remain pristine and unpolluted human activities in a world that has nearly destroyed itself through its unrestricted beliefs in technology, state bureaucracy and mass movements. As the latter are now used to characterise both the Nazis and metaphysical humanism, Heidegger is allowed to ask: who is actually to blame for the modern crisis? Those like him who care for being in its simplicity and mystery or those who have become intoxicated by wild promises of emancipation, social change and self-determination of modern values, machines and institutions? The real danger of inhumanity lies dormant beneath modern institutions and its metaphysical humanism; conversely, humanity's best hopes lie in those who care for the essence of being. Interestingly, however, this conservative critique will still depend on its own variant of a logic of reconciliation: we *must* trust those who *can* know better and let *them* show *us* the way.

<sup>36</sup> See Derrida (1991b: 46), Haar (1993: 141–2), Soper (1986: 58) for further discussion. At 24 years of age, a young Habermas commented that it is the lack of any universalistic underpinning that makes possible this dangerous elitism. Without 'egalitarianism', he contends, there is neither the 'counterweight against the notion of the natural privilege of the stronger nor the counterweight of cosmopolitanism against the motif of the German people as history's "chosen people"' (Habermas 1991a: 196).

Heidegger's well-known critique of technology builds on this line of thought; this is a critique of the *modern* understanding of *modern* technology because technology has become an expression of the materialism and anthropocentrism of modern culture. Rather than being a mere instrument, technology is a 'form of truth' which 'is grounded in the history of metaphysics' (1993a: 243–4). A purely instrumental conception of technology loses sight of handicraft and its relationship to the world; instead, it reinforces the distorted anthropocentrism that governs modern civilisation: as it creates the illusion of human authorship and full control of consequences, technology triggers an inauthentic relationship between being, man and the world (1993b: 324–6, 335). Technology is to Heidegger a form of knowledge and, through the strong association between *techné* and *episteme* (1993b: 320), between science and knowledge, technology is to be seen also as an art form: '[b]ecause the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive conformation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other hand, fundamentally different from it' (1993b: 340). But this essential understanding of technology in its relation to being is precisely what 'technological man' cannot do within 'mass society' (1993a: 255). *Modern* technology is a travesty of what is essential about technology: 'The essence of technology lies in what from the beginning and before all else gives food for thought' (2004: 22). The inauthenticity of modern man is mirrored by the 'monstrousness' of modern technology (1993b: 321); Heidegger dislikes technology because it uproots and no longer allows for an authentic separation between natives and strangers: technology is to be rejected because it knows no *Heimat* (Levinas 1990a: 232–3).<sup>37</sup>

At this point, the inversion, the so-called *turn*, that Heidegger has effectuated is total: there is an anti-humanist rejection of most human activities that is however introduced as essentially humanist. Humanism has been redefined as that caring for being that lies outside mundane activities and the organic dimension of human life. This restoration of being is given the task of redefining and then looking after the essence of man; a task that requires the philosopher to remove all the obstacles with which modern life has cut off man's access to being. The oldest and primordial has now to provide orientation for the future:

<sup>37</sup> Whether Heidegger consistently rejected technology as monstrous, or his views changed after the war and in order to separate his position from official Nazi ideology that trusted technology to deliver a future society, remains an open question (Faye 2009: 72, Safranski 1998: 275, 293).

With regard to this more essential *humanitas* of *homo humanus* there arises the possibility of restoring to the word “humanism” a historical sense that is older than its oldest meaning chronologically reckoned. The restoration is not to be understood as though the world “humanism” were wholly without meaning and a mere *flatus vocis* [empty word]. The “*humanum*” in the world points to *humanitas*, the essence of man; the “-ism” indicates that the essence of man is meant to be taken essentially . . . “Humanism” now means, in case we decide to retain the word, that the essence of man is essential for the truth of Being, specifically in such a way that what matters is not man simply as such. So we are thinking of a curious kind of “humanism”. (1993a: 247–8, underlining mine)

Heidegger positions himself as the poet-thinker who alone is able to reclaim the purity of the *Vita Contemplativa*. Heidegger’s self-presentation is that of a pure thinker who craves only for peace and quiet – the contemplative monk that is not even understood by most of his peers. This requires him not only to reject the modern world but also to offer a highly elitist vision of what is essential and what is base in defining humanity. But, as we will see also in Chapter 2, this is a bastard version of the *vita contemplativa* that is not only reductionist but is also constituted at the expense of any genuine connection to the *vita activa*. Heidegger cannot speak about the political context within which his interventions have taken place, about his personal failures *in* the modern world, but then faults the world itself for the consequences of his actions. In this restorative humanism, real human beings truly do not matter.

We must not forget that this revalorisation of the life of the mind takes place after politics had failed Heidegger and indeed after he had failed the test of politics. But politics, it seems to me, is where we find the ultimate difficulty in Heidegger’s relationship to modernity. Heidegger may pretend to have nothing to say about what was happening to fellow human beings during the war, but philosophy itself did not – not least through the deeply humanist legacy of several of his own disciples: Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, Hans Jonas, Emmanuel Levinas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Karl Löwith.<sup>38</sup> One can almost hear the grip of Heidegger’s furious hand as he writes that ‘[t]he essence of evil does not consist in the *mere baseness* of human action, but rather *in the malice of rage*. Both of these, however, healing and the raging, can essentially occur only in Being, in so far as Being itself is what is contested’ (1993a: 260, my italics). Barred from the university, guilty of ungratefulness towards old masters, disowned by his previously adoring pupils, Heidegger is now fighting against public humiliation. Here, the question is not only about

<sup>38</sup> Within the Frankfurt school of critical theory, Erich Fromm is arguably unique in his *continuous* recovery of humanism. I am grateful to Kieran Durkin (2014) for clarifying this for me.

his support for a regime that committed heinous crimes but about the seductions of power, his lack of remorse or sense of responsibility and, given his own reputation, about the role of philosophy itself:

Since ancient times philosophy, unlike every other branch of learning, has been guided by the idea that its pursuit shapes not only the knowledge but also the conduct of its disciples, specifically in the service of the Good, which is after all the goal of knowledge . . . Therefore, when the most profound thinker of my time fell into step with the march of Hitler's brown battalions, it was not merely a bitter personal disappointment for me but in my eyes a debacle for philosophy. Philosophy itself, not only a man, had declared bankruptcy. (Jonas 1996: 49)<sup>39</sup>

In his intoxication with historicity and language, Heidegger lost control of his own thinking. The more he pushed for the autonomy of language, the less he had to concern himself with the actual implications of his words and, of course, his deeds. This argument *can* and indeed has been made as an attempt to exonerate him both politically and philosophically (Gadamer 1992). Yet it may also be seen as the ultimate warning against what may happen when, under extreme circumstances, to be sure, we actively seek to give up on 'old' humanist ideas of personal autonomy and responsibility.<sup>40</sup>

### III

Even if some or even most aspects of my interpretation of Heidegger are seen as one-sided, one argument that remains is the extent to which his critique of humanism has become ubiquitous: the humanism of Western metaphysics is to blame for the contemporary crises of modern society. Through mass mobilisation, a blind belief in technology, the power of state bureaucracy and nationalism, the Nazis are an extreme but ultimately coherent result of Western metaphysics.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> In his short stint as rector 'Heidegger failed utterly, precisely as a "Führer"' (Pöggeler 1991: 215).

<sup>40</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (1991: 105) comments as follows on this issue: 'it is perhaps because he never realized what he was saying that Heidegger was able to say what he did say without really having to say it. And it is perhaps for the same reason that he refused to the very end to discuss his Nazi involvement: to do it properly would have been to admit (to himself as well as to others) that his "essentialist thought" had never consciously formulated its essence'.

<sup>41</sup> See my discussion of posthumanism in the Introduction. Peter Sloterdijk is highly critical of Heidegger's nostalgic argument for a *new* humanism, and even more critical of Derrida's attempt to deconstruct it, but this kind of critique of humanism is the key point on which Sloterdijk (2009: 17) agrees with Heidegger. Sloterdijk seems to be speaking on behalf of a whole generation when he explains why humanism is to blame for the modern world's major misdeeds: 'Why should humanism and its general philosophical self-presentation be seen as the solution for humanity, when *the catastrophe of the*

Jacques Derrida's discussion of Heidegger touches on several issues that we have discussed already and, given Derrida's own salience in later debates, can be taken as paradigmatic: Heidegger's anti-naturalism places his thinking at odds with any form of racial thinking, his rejection of Western metaphysics is an invitation towards a truer form of philosophy, and the interconnections between poetry and philosophy are to be given greater intellectual consideration. Derrida's difficulties in dealing with Heidegger and his legacy are a good case in point for Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's claim that 'it is not always easy to be Heideggerian' (1995: 108).<sup>42</sup> As he delved into Heidegger's writing, Derrida's interpretation becomes less a philosophical exercise and more an attempt at normative self-justification that, as it departs from Heidegger's conclusions, is not prepared to disown its legacy. To be clear, my claim is not that, through his debt to Heidegger, Derrida is guilty by association (Habermas 1987). But nor am I convinced that Derrida's philosophical exoneration of Heidegger's political responsibility works at any level. The claim that there is ultimately a *rationalist core* in Derrida's work may be too strong a conclusion for what I am going to argue below, but I will seek to demonstrate that there remains a *humanist* sensibility in his thinking that ultimately betrays the hermeneutical sophistication that Derrida himself deploys in his interpretation of Heidegger. Derrida's difficulties are mostly self-inflicted, as they derive from what I consider is a failed attempt to get beyond the uncomfortable political implications of Heidegger's anti-humanism.

Derrida (1991b) devoted a short book to Heidegger where he discusses Heidegger's relationship to the Nazi regime. He does so by focusing on two texts from the period between 1933 and 1935 when Heidegger was most active politically: the inaugural address he gave as rector, which was delivered in May 1933, and one lecture course of 1934–5 that was later published as *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Derrida's argument for that period is that the political equivocations of these two texts represent an anomaly, a genuine exception, within Heidegger's oeuvre. It is true that we now know much more about Heidegger's biography than Derrida knew back then and this fact alone creates severe problems to his interpretation. But given that Derrida's case does not rely on biographical facts but on philosophical exegesis – indeed, it fundamentally relies on the

*present clearly shows that it is man himself, along with his systems of metaphysical self-improvement and self-clarification, that is the problem?*' (my italics).

<sup>42</sup> It looks as though it is *never easy* to be Heideggerian: a so-called 'Derrida affair' took place upon his opposition to the republication in English translation of an interview he gave on occasion of the French translation of Víctor Fariás's book *Heidegger and Nazism* (see Derrida 1991a, Sheehan 1993 and Wolin 1993).

merits deconstruction as a philosophical ‘method’, his arguments are still worth looking at in some detail. Derrida’s interpretation of Heidegger is based on three main claims.

1. There is, he contends, a subtle but unmistakable change in the way in which Heidegger used the idea of spirit (*Geist*) and its derivatives (*geistig* and *geistlich*). Derrida argues that spirit does not figure significantly in Heidegger’s work; indeed, references to it are explicitly avoided in Heidegger’s early writings and, when used, they appear always within inverted commas (1991b: 3–7, 14–30, 37, 65–6, 71–2). This detached use of ‘spirit’ is taken to mean a *critique* of Hegel’s metaphysics. Hegel rather than Heidegger would have been prone to the historical and political mystification of a national *Geist* and it is Heidegger’s very criticism of Hegel that makes him immune to that kind of hypostatisation: *Geist* is simply the wrong term to capture the substantive historicity of *Dasein*. All this changes between 1933 and 1935, however, as this is the only time when Heidegger made full use of spirit and its derivatives without quotation marks; indeed, they are italicised and emphasised as expression of Heidegger’s new political commitments towards the regime (1991b: 31). But then things change again after his stepping down as rector. Whereas before Heidegger had preferred the word *geistig*, after 1935 the word of choice is *geistlich*. Derrida’s case is that this modification expresses that Heidegger is dissociating himself from those writings in which he supported the Nazis (1991b: 33).<sup>43</sup>

2. Derrida accepts that, during the critical 1933–5 period, Heidegger’s use of spirit did refer to a substantial unity between the individual and the collective; a sense of unity in which total commitment was to be expected and could be demanded (1991b: 39).<sup>44</sup> Derrida opens his discussion of the rectoral address by emphasising Heidegger’s *personal* responsibility for the text he had penned and then delivered on behalf of a *German*

<sup>43</sup> I am unable to settle this, but Faye’s (2009) extensive discussion of Heidegger’s unpublished texts of that period offers substantive evidence against this kind of exegesis. On the wider terminological transformations that characterise the use of everyday and philosophical language during the Third Reich, see Klemperer (2013) and Voegelin (1999). An ‘ideology critique’ of Heidegger’s jargon (but also, and equally interesting, of Jasper’s existentialist writings) is classically available in Adorno (2003). The more general point concerns the merits of deconstruction as a philosophical method that does not require external factors as part of textual exegesis: whether we can isolate philosophical/etymological analysis from the use of concepts in their wider sociocultural context. This is particularly relevant here because Heidegger’s appeal to a pristine philosophical language is *not* a purely philosophical move but an expression of his rejection of emergent mass society (Adorno 2003: 22, 35–42).

<sup>44</sup> ‘The leader himself and he alone *is* the present and future of German reality, and its law’ (cited in Janicaud 1996: 28).

*university*: '[t]o the extent that he countersigns the assignment of spirit, the author of the *Address*, as such, cannot exempt himself from any responsibility' (1991b: 38). But as he elaborates on the nature of this responsibility, Derrida does not seem convinced that this really holds. He claims that '[o]ne could say that he spiritualizes National Socialism. And one could reproach him for this . . . But, on the other hand, by taking the risk of spiritualizing National Socialism, he might be trying to absolve or save it . . . This address *seems* no longer to belong simply to the "ideological" camp in which one appeals to obscure forces' (1991b: 39, underlining mine).

The German university in search for self-affirmation, the title of Heidegger's speech, is now a fully politicised institution that is committed to the nation, speaks on behalf of the state and answers only to the Führer himself (Faye 2009: 39–58). As we will see below, a major difficulty for Derrida is that in his own previous work about Heidegger he had already argued that philosophy is only viable in the context of freedom and democracy – and yet these are the very ideas against which Heidegger's rectoral address was reacting. Derrida further contends that, when spirit is used in this highly ideological context, this was meant to oppose the racist blood and soil ideology of the Nazis. We have raised doubts as to whether this is unequivocally the case, but Derrida still criticises Heidegger because, by siding with spirit and against nature, Heidegger is now 'reinscribing spirit in an oppositional determination, by once again making it a unilaterality of subjectivity' (1991b: 39). Heidegger pays a heavy philosophical price for this uncritical opposition between nature and spirit, Derrida contends, because it is now Heidegger himself who has returned to the subjective metaphysics that he had so vehemently criticised in *Being and Time*. Derrida draws an explicit comparison between these two, very different, errors: the political one that led to Heidegger's support for National Socialism *and* the philosophical one that led Heidegger to the same kind of metaphysical subjectivism that in his view underpins our very discourses on 'democracy or "human rights"' (1991b: 40). A point that we have made several times before, humanism is not only seen as impotent against totalitarianism, it actually is to blame for it. This is how Derrida takes the analogy further:

Even if all forms of complicity are not equivalent, they are *irreducible*. The question of knowing which is the least grave of these forms of complicity is always there – its urgency and its seriousness could not be over-stressed – but it will never dissolve the irreducibility of this fact . . . In the *Rectorship Address*, this task is not just a risk run. If its programme *seems* diabolical, it is because, *without there being anything fortuitous in this*, it capitalizes on the worst, that is on both evils at once: the

sanctioning of Nazism, and the gesture that is still metaphysical . . . this equivocation has to do with the fact that *Geist* is always haunted by its *Geist* . . . Metaphysics always returns. (1991b: 40, underlining mine)

Derrida's point remains ambiguous at best: what does it actually mean to contend that the sin of committing to the metaphysics of subjectivity and the political endorsement of the Nazis are 'irreducible'? Is it adequate to speak of a diabolical programme on the grounds that it commits to 'both evils at once' (the political one towards the party, the philosophical one towards metaphysical subjectivism?). It is difficult to agree with Derrida when he finally claims that, in relation to Heidegger's politics, 'we do not yet know what Nazism is' (1991a: 268).

3. Derrida's final step in what increasingly reads like a rescue exercise is to lower the bar for what was deemed politically reasonable in the mid 1930s. The exculpatory argument now appeals to the anti-humanist temptations that were experienced by philosophers of all credos. To be sure, the political hypocrisy from Right and Left in the use of apparently humanist values in the context of the Cold War is central to any explanation of the mainstream anti-humanism in the social sciences and humanities since the 1960s (Said 2004: 12–13, 31–56). Derrida argues that, yes, it is true that Heidegger got this very wrong, but his political equivocations are no different, they are in fact very similar, to those of so many other European thinkers at the time. The critique of bourgeois modernity that was offered by the Nazis belonged to a more general trend among intellectuals of all persuasions; or, at least, it applies to those whose boldness prepared them to enter 'into regions haunted by what is diabolical in relation to a philosophy that is self-assured in its left-liberal, democratic humanism' (1991a: 266). Derrida thus quotes at length from Husserl's *The Crisis of European Science* in order to show that Husserl made a similar use of the idea of spirit in that essay. He also analyses Paul Valéry's writings from 1919 in order to make an analogous claim (1991b: 120–4). The general point Derrida makes is well known, but also troublesome:

On the basis of an example taken from a discourse which in general is not suspected of the worst [i.e. Husserl], it is useful to recall that the reference to *spirit*, to the *freedom* of spirit, and to spirit as *European* spirit could and still can ally itself with the politics one would want to oppose. And this reference to spirit, and to Europe, is more an external or accidental ornament for Husserl's thought than it is to Heidegger's. (1991b: 121).

The argument has now shifted because here Heidegger has no special case to answer for his politics; either we all have to do so in equal measure – we are *all* guilty or, more plausibly, we could all have been

guilty – or there is no use at all for the idea of responsibility in that context. There is nothing of philosophical relevance in our obsession with passing judgement on Heidegger's politics; this is just another case of victor's justice. Heidegger had consciously decided not to apologise for his deeds and Derrida has decided that half an apology will suffice.<sup>45</sup>

Let me now go back to the first text in which Derrida engaged directly with the question of humanism in Heidegger and beyond; a short piece that was composed in April 1968. A first thing to note is that Derrida devotes a long introduction to the political issues of the day (1982: 114). He explicitly mentions American involvement in Vietnam and his reservations that, by travelling to New York to attend the academic conference at which this paper was to be read, he was in no way endorsing US imperialist policies. Derrida also makes reference to the recent assassination of Martin Luther King and the entering of police forces into universities in Paris at the request of university authorities; these were all the *explicit* 'historical and political horizon' of his piece on humanism (1982: 114). But Derrida is not merely commenting on these very different political issues; he mentions them in order to draw two philosophical conclusions that have a direct bearing on our discussion. The first of these he terms 'the universality of philosophical discourse' (1982: 112), which he defines as the fact that international philosophical conferences transcend national parochialisms and must engage with the general questions that make philosophy a worthy intellectual pursuit. Indeed, the question of the human is central in this context: 'the interest in the universality of the anthropos is doubtless a sign of this effort' (1982: 113). The second implication refers to the interrelationships between philosophy and *democratic politics*, and his argument here is that only *democratic dialogue* can give form to an 'international philosophical colloquium': in so far as philosophers take part in these encounters, they only do so in their professional capacity – they speak on behalf of their genuine love for truth (1982: 114). Derrida put it quite strongly: 'the philosophers present here do not assume the official policies of their countries' (1982: 113). Freedom, understood as personal autonomy and responsibility, is the tie that binds philosophy and

<sup>45</sup> This interpretation of Husserl (1970) is however disingenuous even in relation to that particular lecture: Husserl is surely to blame for his unreconstructed Eurocentrism, but the fundamentally rationalist sensibility he embraced and defended there has nothing to do with Derrida's claims in his defence of Heidegger. A certain rejoinder to Jaspers's argument on German guilt seems to be running through Derrida's partial exoneration (though Jaspers is not explicitly mentioned). The key to Jaspers's argument was that there is no such thing as collective guilt – collective actors are never to be treated as undifferentiated wholes. What matters is the *personal* admission of moral, political and indeed 'metaphysical' responsibility – and it is here where Heidegger fails. See Jaspers (2000: 19–27, 55–63).

democratic discourse and, therefore, ‘*democracy* must be the *form* of the political organization of society’ (1982: 113).

These are intensely political opening remarks for a text that offers an elegant, original, but ultimately conventionally philosophical account of the same controversy on humanism that we have been revisiting so far. Indeed, it is difficult not to interpret Derrida’s political overture as intrinsically connected to the political motifs that we have been discussing up to now: the apparently apolitical tone of Heidegger’s *Letter vis-à-vis* the highly political context in which the text was composed. On the one hand, Derrida accepts the conventional self-comprehension of philosophy as an activity of unconstrained, critical thinking: ‘[p]hilosophy embodies the spirit of democracy insofar as it the institutionalization of radical questioning’ (Heller 1991c: 493). On the other hand, it is as though Derrida is preempting the objections that may be raised against invoking Heidegger as the leitmotif for a paper on ‘man’ that starts with democracy and dialogue and defends a strong idea of personal autonomy.<sup>46</sup> The philosopher that he undoubtedly was, Heidegger did not and indeed could not speak but from his love of truth: as a thinker, he could never have spoken on behalf of the nation. If the universality of the concern for the anthropos is an expression of a genuine philosophical mind, and if democracy must always be the political form of philosophy, then the democratic credentials of ‘Heidegger-the-philosopher’ are as good as anyone’s – and through this his actual political opinions and actions are turned irrelevant. And because in this commitment to the universality of philosophical language Heidegger had renounced all other commitments but philosophy itself, we must all do likewise in order to appreciate the philosophical merits of his work: nothing but philosophical motifs are to be allowed in. In so far as Heidegger showed an interest in the universality of the anthropological question, as a philosopher he is to be welcomed in the atemporal conversation of philosophy. No further questions can, need or ought to be raised.

Derrida then reads Heidegger’s *Letter* as an ‘archaeology’ whose main goal was to de-provincialise humanism: to separate it out from the tradition of Western metaphysics (1982: 128). Indeed, the very claim on the universality of the anthropological question with which Derrida opened his lecture was aimed at destabilising the ongoing debate as to whether

<sup>46</sup> There is even the possibility that Derrida was thinking of Heidegger’s failed participation in a conference to celebrate Descartes’s work that was held in Paris in 1936. The reasons behind Heidegger’s absence remain unclear, but late in life Heidegger still showed disappointment at not having been allowed to travel to this conference in an *official capacity* (Heidegger 1991b: 102). As it turned out, he was saved from the embarrassment of chairing a German delegation in which colleagues thought it fitting to attend *philosophical* debates wearing their brown party uniforms (Kleinberg 2003: 163, Safranski 1998: 323–5).

Heidegger's philosophy was to be read as for or against humanism. It does not really matter whether Heidegger changed his mind on this particular issue: what *is* essential is the fact that Heidegger *was* centrally concerned with these questions *because this is part of the immanent logic of philosophy itself*. Derrida then moves within familiar terrain as he distinguishes two forms of humanism. On the one side, there is the kind of humanism that we associate with Sartre, metaphysics and subjectivity. Derrida sides with Heidegger's critique here and contends that this position is fundamentally misguided because of its logic of reconciliation. Sartre offers a humanism of 'unity' and, worse still, his logic of reconciliation turns Sartre's claims into a form of religious thinking in disguise: what appears to be a 'neutral' discourse favours in fact 'the metaphysical unity of man and God, the relation of man to God, the project of becoming God as the project constituting human-reality. Atheism changes nothing in this fundamental structure' (1982: 116). Sartre's humanism offers little other than a form of essentialism, and Derrida resorts to the Foucault of *The Order of Things*, which had just been published, to argue that 'the history of the concept of man' is still to be fully examined (1982: 116). Arguably best represented in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Derrida claims that this kind of humanism has become mainstream in the West after the Second World War: it is in fact 'the unperceived and uncontested common ground of Marxism and of Social-Democratic and Christian-Democratic discourse' (1982: 117).

But while this branch of humanism has remained the dominant philosophical and political discourse in France, in Germany, on the other hand, there is a different form of humanism whose trajectory Derrida traces through Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger himself.<sup>47</sup> This variant of humanism does not have a systematic concern with 'the unity of the anthropos', which is rather seen as an open question: the grounds on which each rejected it remained 'diffuse', but they all tried to overcome this 'old metaphysical humanism' (1982: 119). A shared philosophical interest lies in their attempts towards the 'neutralization of every metaphysical or speculative thesis', so that anthropological questions can still be taken seriously *because* they are no longer endowed with a transcendental status (1982: 115). This is also Heidegger's challenge: to dissolve humanism's metaphysical legacy while at the same time trying to articulate a *new*, non-anthropocentric position that avoids anti-humanism. Derrida argues that Hegel's phenomenology 'is *no longer*,

<sup>47</sup> The idea that these three 'Hs' form their own humanist tradition had already been advanced by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1957: 315–39). See also Rockmore (1995: 140).

but it is *still* a science of man' (1982: 120–1), whereas the jury is still out with regard to Husserl, whose philosophy openly poses the challenge that *any* anthropology has to face:

the critique of empirical anthropologism is only the affirmation of a transcendental humanism . . . The end of man (as a factual anthropological limit) is announced to thought from the vantage of the end of man (as a determined opening or the infinity of a *telos*) . . . *The name of man has always been inscribed in metaphysics between these two ends. It has meaning only in this eschato-teleological situation.* (1982: 123, my italics)

I have briefly mentioned that, in his Vienna lecture of 1935, Husserl did portray Europe sitting at the top of humanity's intellectual evolution. But there is another claim that is arguably more important to us here: the unprecedented success of modern science should not blind us to the fact that science remains a fundamentally human product. Humanity is not science's primary *object* but remains its unique *source*: science is nothing but a result of human action itself. When Derrida claims that being 'remains the thinking of man' we are in fact in the presence of two different arguments (1982: 128) and this is the duality that gives title to Derrida's piece: the idea of the ends of man points to the 'double genitive' that was so important to Heidegger.<sup>48</sup> There are those ends that humans set for themselves and whose value depend on the fact that they are pursued by human beings. And there are also those ends that speak of a movement towards human beings' own completion as human beings: *man as finis* refers to the human ability to endow things with a certain dignity because they are the object of human pursuit, whereas *man as telos* speaks about the process of immanent fulfilment of humans' own potentials. Making full use of his own methodology of writing from the margins of philosophy, Derrida elaborates on this point in a long footnote in which he explains the *fundamentally Kantian horizon of this distinction* (1982: 121–2, n. 15).

Derrida reconstructs Kant's predicament as follows: if Kant stays close to the idea of man as a being who can become an end in itself, then a purely empirical idea of the human is insufficient. Only self-positing reason can speak of an end in itself but, although human beings are rational, they share this property with a whole range of pure rational beings. In other words, if the idea of an end in itself was expected to *endow* humans with dignity, this in fact undermines the very uniqueness of the human because it refers to a notion of transcendental rather than human reason. Kant knows that humans are not pure rational beings, but he equally knows that humans are the only empirical instance of a rational being of whom we are aware. Derrida comments sympathetically on Kant's difficulty and, in fact, he

<sup>48</sup> See Heidegger (1993a: 220) and Löwith (1995: 63–4).

holds onto it – as we said, this duality of the ends of man gives title to Derrida’s piece. Derrida’s reading now points in a direction that to my mind grows increasingly incompatible with Heidegger’s argument in *Letter*:

despite the critique of anthropologism . . . man is the *only example*, the only case of a rational being that can ever be cited at the very moment when by all rights one distinguishes the universal concept of a rational being from the concept of the human being. It is through the offices of this *fact* that anthropology regains all its contested authority. (1982: 122, underlining mine)

Derrida is arguing for a new lineage of humanism that recognises the ethical and even theological import of man. He accepts that the position of man is problematic at a *philosophical* level but, at the same time, an anthropology remains the one normative guarantee that philosophy will not turn itself against humans: ‘[w]hatever the breaks marked by this Hegelian-Husserlian-Heideggerian anthropology . . . there is an uninterrupted metaphysical familiarity with that which, so naturally, links the *we* of the philosopher to the “we men,” to the *we* in the horizon of humanity’ (1982: 116). In relation to Hegel and Husserl, Derrida is critical of how they use this ‘we’ in which the philosopher believes he can play god; they have not fully broken free from the metaphysical logic of reconciliation. In relation to Heidegger, Derrida also speaks of a ‘kind of magnetic attraction’ that does not allow for the full *dissociation* of philosophy and anthropology (1982: 124). There is, he says, a ‘hold’ that remains between ‘the “humanity” of man and the thinking of Being’, between ‘a *certain* humanism and the truth of Being’ (1982: 123, my italics). Philosophically, humanism remains a form of metaphysics, but its disappearance leaves the door open for a non-humanism that is normatively unacceptable. Derrida uses the image of man as a gatekeeper; man becomes a methodological access point to being. The human does not disappear but its role is to be *reduced* to that of an entity whose goal is to allow for the enquiry into the essence of being: ‘[i]t is in the play of a certain proximity, proximity to oneself and proximity to Being, that we will see constituted, against metaphysical humanism and anthropologism, another insistence of man, one which relays, relieves, supplements that which it destroys’ (1982: 124).

Derrida has found a good reason to keep hold of ‘man’: it offers a *point of access to being*. A certain humanism can now be retained because it no longer plays its old role as a doctrine that endowed humans with their own autonomous value; rather, humanism has become the one residual category that, above all, *prevents* anti-humanism. As man opens the door for human access to being, Derrida has settled for a *methodological justification*

of humanism. But we have seen that this is not Heidegger's position and, as an interpretation of Heidegger, this remains problematic because it is hardly compatible with Heidegger's own elitism and irrationalism: Derrida has to overlook not only Heidegger's constant scepticism against the true philosophical value of *any* anthropology but also, and more importantly, against the idea that *some* activities (poetry and philosophy) are to remain being's exclusive shepherds. Derrida does not really solve this problem; instead, we end with the worst of both worlds – on the one hand, Heidegger's insight that 'man cannot be thought as a separate entity' from being leaves the door open for all kinds of normative devaluation of the human; on the other hand, a purely instrumental idea of man as a methodological gatekeeper to something higher is no conception of man at all (Haar 1993: 73–4). Derrida will of course insist that there *is* in Heidegger an attempt at '*the reevaluation and revalorization of the essence of the dignity of man*', but then again the only motifs that remain available for Derrida to make this claim depend on Heidegger's conservatism and anti-modernism: the fact that man is being '*threatened* in the extension of metaphysics and technology' (1982: 128, my italics). Derrida has run into a dead end because the more he claims that Heidegger's arguments remain a form of humanism, the more Heidegger himself is reframed within the reconciliatory logic that is central to their shared critique of metaphysics: '[t]he *restoration* of the essence is also the *restoration* of a dignity and a proximity: the co-responding dignity of Being and man, the proximity of Being and man' (1982: 130, my italics).

As Derrida reads the late Heidegger more in line with *Being and Time*, he disowns the more explicit anti-humanism of *Letter*. His is an argument for a return to the idea that man and being are co-constitutive, whereas the whole point of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics depends precisely on the rejection of that interpretation. Heidegger's mysterious being becomes in Derrida the more acceptable idea of human beings' internal transcendence: humans are beings with the ability to transcend themselves – both in thinking and in action. As they participate in the construction of this exteriority, humans do experience others and themselves as something alien and beyond their control: in society, authenticity is indeed lost. As humans are only partly authors of the world that they inhabit, philosophy and science are to be seen as human activities whose success depends on they having to abandon the anthropocentric view that humans are the *only* source of *all* value.<sup>49</sup> Derrida's rescue exercise *appears* to work on the condition that Heidegger now *favours* the very logic of reconciliation that he had systematically criticised. Crucially, however, whereas Sartre's case

<sup>49</sup> See Norris (1987: 219–21) for further discussion.

for reconciliation remains full of problems, he could still look positively to what humans, through freedom and autonomy, can do for others and for themselves as members of the same species. *Pace* Heidegger, it is Derrida who eventually clarified for us that a *humanism of being* is no humanism at all.

### *Closing Remarks*

A key feature that Sartre and Heidegger share – indeed one that Sartre seems to have borrowed from Heidegger – is the notion that we ought to ‘seize’ the historical moment with a ‘realism’ that allows only for concrete alternatives. Because every situation has endless possible meanings, there is a ‘radical’ need for action that is to show itself in one’s commitment rather than in the tentative reflection on its numerous possible paths. As a link between self and world, *commitment* was expected to lead to authenticity, and difficult decisions were to be reduced to two options alone: class or nation, capitalism or socialism, democracy or fascism, imperialism or anti-colonialism, them or us, the universal or the particular. Once and again both writers speak about the inevitably modern ‘need to choose’ and did not refrain from offering their intellectual and philosophical arguments for the cause. It has become clear, to my mind at least, that Heidegger fares politically far worse than Sartre – even as the latter is anything but a beacon of lucidity. A key lesson for us is that rather than an apparently *radical* need to choose, a more genuine radicalism may depend on how we reflect carefully on the normative principles we encounter in the world of politics.

As we looked at the various texts, Sartre’s ultimate concern with human freedom, dignity and equality is a normative insight that we ought to retain. It is above all Sartre’s egalitarianism and rationalism that radically contrasts with Heidegger’s position, where elitism and irrationalism prevail. This accounts neither automatically nor necessarily for his endorsement of Nazi politics, but left him horribly vulnerable to it. This is precisely what Derrida seems to have realised as he sought to reframe Heidegger’s weaknesses in two ways: first, by making a dogmatic claim on the necessary relations between politics and democratic freedom, he cleanses Heidegger’s philosophy of any political responsibility; second, by re-establishing a parity between man and being, he sought to avoid, or at least contain, the anti-humanist implications of Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics.

Starting with Hannah Arendt, in the rest of this book we shall explore various anthropological dimensions and ideas of the human as they have transpired in both philosophy and sociology since the late 1950s. This attempt can of course be seen as a humanist enterprise: it presupposes the existence and indeed worthiness of what is about to be studied. I also

argue that an interrogation into our fundamental anthropological features may help us reconsider the question of the normative in society. If humanism needs recovering and rearticulation in the current context, this is to be done against the backdrop of Heidegger's influence in contemporary debates. Humanism is anything but unproblematic, but its outright rejection creates even more difficulties. Let me then conclude this long chapter by presenting four main arguments that will prove of relevance in what follows.

- All claims about humanism we have looked at work through an internal differentiation between at least two kinds of humanist positions: one version is criticised and rejected, the other, in turn, is to be rescued and upheld. Interestingly, the fact that no openly anti-humanist position is favoured speaks, it seems to me, about the fundamental normative necessity of *some* conception of the human: they alone are the creatures that endow our intellectual work with a normative orientation. Our conceptions of the human – whether or not they are explicitly articulated – underpin our normative notions in social life. As we discussed it in the Introduction, this is precisely the main challenge that contemporary posthumanists have to face: what is the human core for which they are prepared to make a positive case so that *their* normative positions can be adequately accounted for.
- A first strand of humanism we have reviewed centres on inclusivity and freedom as the foundational properties of an autonomous subject. It emphasises creativity and imagination as anthropological capacities while inclusivity and egalitarianism are their main normative implications. Its key strength lies in the fact that, to the extent that it remains committed to an idea of the dignity of 'the human', we are to remain in control over the normative implications of our arguments. An idea that Kant made first apparent, the paradox this creates is that we simultaneously speak about things that are *good in themselves* but are only able to justify these through the *subjective* reference to the humans for whom this is in fact the case. On the other hand, one highly problematic aspect of this humanism lies in its logic of reconciliation, as it seems to require that we commit to the *ultimate coincidence* between the objective and the subjective, between the universal and the particular. The grounds on which this logic of reconciliation is sustained can be extremely varied and this explains the fact humanism can and has been promoted on all sorts of non-human grounds: divine, naturalistic, teleological and cosmological.
- A second strand of humanism defines itself in opposition to the previous one and speaks about the meaning for human life as something that

defies or even rejects human authorship; it is rather derived from the outside. Instead of creativity, its key anthropological capacity becomes the human ability to absorb, reconfigure and ultimately accept external circumstances as they are. Meaning must then be recovered through some form of privileged engagement with art, simplicity, mystery or authenticity. A common trend that we have observed in Heidegger, Lyotard, Derrida, Sloterdijk and Deleuze and Guattari is that they make humanism responsible for the worst of modernity's deeds. This charge is based on the violence that underpins its teleology of reconciliation, and their critique *appears* to work because it blames the traditional normative ideals of modernity – perpetual peace, social justice, human solidarity – for modernity's chronic inability to deliver on these promises. Worse still, they blame these values for turning a blind eye on such atrocities as racism, genocide, poverty and discrimination.

- Ultimately, however, all humanist positions have to face the challenge of anthropocentrism: what are they to do with the principle of human *authorship* and the idea that humans are 'the measure of all things'. If *too much* is made of the human, then the creative prowess of the anthropos becomes also its curse; if too little is made of the human, then it can be sacrificed on behalf of a higher good.