

Volker Gerhardt

## **All we must do is...wait**

How the history of being distorts the future of the human

1. *There is something which matters, something crucial again.* The most recent advances in genetic research and bio-technology have brought the attention of the (European) public to those questions with which philosophy was concerned from the very beginning. We may mark these questions by one attribute: They are asked ever anew, even when professional philosophers have long since forgotten to investigate them. Hence it was not a philosopher, but rather a biologist who has frankly reminded us of the Delphic *gnothi s'auton* ("Know thyself"): Genetic research is, according to the Swiss scientist Gottfried Schatz, the instrument with which we shall "attain a more profound knowledge of ourselves."<sup>1</sup>

This biologist is not alone in his opinion. Following Craig Venter's media coup, the feuilletons of European newspapers did need a couple of weeks to overcome their decade-old haughtiness towards new developments in the natural sciences. Then, however, they devoted themselves all the more to the speculations concerning the technical and social consequences. This first hour belonged to the blind seers, who suddenly saw everything on the verge of radical change. Their message: The future no longer needs human beings, for in the future the machines will be able to take care of themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Directly thereafter, more deliberate and circumspect words were to be heard. It was made clear that genetic and nanotechnology would not precipitate a fundamental change of direction in the dynamics of our culture: The revolution, that ideal cherished by those who found reality upon ideas, was once again proclaimed too soon. The sole thing which

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<sup>1</sup> Gottfried Schatz, Lecture at the Biotechnology World Congress, September 2000 at the Wissenschaftsforum Berlin; reported in *Der Tagesspiegel*, September 8, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> This was at least what Bill Joy meant (in: *Wired*, 2, 2000) when he proffered the thesis that the future no longer need man. To be sure – had he said it as I have formulated it here, it might have occurred to him that his prognosis contains an internal contradiction. For one needs more than a program of self-maintenance to be responsible for oneself.

we can observe is a further acceleration of that process which the industrial civilization has kept in motion for more than two-hundred years. This process is based upon a dynamic which human knowledge has determined for as long as this knowledge has been articulated by writing.

In any case: This new technological push aims, as all previous ones have, to provide innovations making work easier and more efficient, innovations supposed to save us energy and time. Therein lies the economic incentive for investment in research in life science and life technology. All advances in this sphere, however unexpected they may be for the layperson, lie first and foremost within the perspective and the domain of human action. That is the first reason why it makes no sense to claim that we have made ourselves superfluous through this technology – even if the old fear of Armageddon, so effectively renewed by ecological movements, has now found yet another variation.

These played-up expectations also had a positive side (in Europe), however, for they drove the old sensations into the background for the moment: Those excited claims of excited subjects that the subject no longer exists have retained their interest only for provincial subjects. The theoretical dismissal of identity – albeit accompanied by an unabated practical and therapeutic effort on behalf of one's own identity – has lost its aesthetic allure. This staged abstinence from identity has nothing to do with reality, which we could not even name without the corresponding identities of things and people, anyway. The question as to whether one should call modernity “post-modernity”, “post-post-modernity” or even the “second” modernity is no longer interesting. For now there is something at hand which really matters. We ask ourselves *what is happening*, what are the *consequences* from the human perspective and where we *stand* in relation to it – as human beings, of course.<sup>3</sup>

**2. *It is comfortable having dual cultures of science.*** But the spectacular promises of the life sciences have ended the decade-old isolation of an intellectual class which was fixated exclusively on social processes. Particularly in France the disappointed 68ers sought surrogates for the revolution which never took place. Their fixation on the topos of radical

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<sup>3</sup> Vide auctorem idem: “Es kommt darauf an”, in: V. Gerhardt (Hrsg.), *Eine angeschlagene These: Die 11. Feuerbach-These im Foyer der Humboldt Universität*. Berlin 1996. pp. 283 ff.

change persisted. Their isolation from the formative powers of history also remained, for they insisted upon the claim to the leadership of the intelligentsia, a claim they had inherited from the priests.

Under the conditions of scientism, the political primacy of the social and human sciences resulted from all this. Though one conscientiously bemoaned the gap between the two “cultures”, one had made things quite comfortable in the domain of one’s proper own science. And since the alienation between the natural and human sciences was itself a social fact, social scientists could convince themselves that in their social analysis they were indeed closer than all others to the real forces behind the events.

One consequence of this political self-conceit in the intellectual class of the human and social sciences was its tendency to rhetorical self-deprecation. The more this class over-evaluated itself, the more important it became to divert attention from itself: And so it invented “logocentrism”, the “other of reason” or “weak thinking” in order to win distance to itself, ostensibly. In reality, the human and social sciences continued to count on the dominance of those discourses in which the natural sciences were not included. It is easier to exercise power over the definition of phenomena under the divided heavens of two cultures of science.

**3. Substantial self-description.** We still can hear it ringing in our ears: The manner in which a so-called “weak thinking”, which called upon a supposedly ultra-modern and anti-essentialist kind of deconstruction, sought to ban all questions as to what things are. Craig Venter has put an end to this. Now questions as to what things are and what they shall be are asked emphatically and on all sides. And behind all of these particular questions arises that *one* towards which, according to Kant, all questions of philosophy lead: *What is a human being?* In light of the now obvious biological dimension of this question it would be ridiculous to interject the reservation that there is no “essence”, no “substance” of man. Of course there isn’t!

And how could this possibly be any other way? What could concepts really achieve if they were the names derived from the origin of things? They probably would not even be usable for thinking, for simulated action. They would lose once and for all the very flexibility which we

value so much in them. And what would remain of human beings if they were to make an unchangeable substance their own? Their hearts would have to be of marble, their souls of polished diamond and, all in all, they would have to be born quite dead in order to even remotely fulfill the conditions of substantial uniformity.

Indeed, Plato has already showed us that a human being can be defined in many different ways. His suggestion to count man among those naked stationary animals which have two legs but not two hooves, and which can neither lay eggs nor live underwater, is a high-spirited caricature of essentialism. When Plato seeks to approach the essence of man via the perception of the other, he finally lets the “soul” mean that which each of us understands as the most familiar thing in the eyes of another. And even this is narrowed down to that which seems both human and divine in its disposition to itself. One recognizes by the awkwardness of this approach that a founded concept of what a human being is results only from the perspective of one who describes himself in his own action.

**4. *Continuity lost.*** Plato and his successors attempted the self-description of the human in constant reference to human technical and political possibilities. It would seem meet, then, to approach the new relevance of the old question as to what a human being is from the side of the philosophical tradition. Why shouldn't we also use those insights and procedures which laid the foundation for the modern acceleration of knowledge in the self-description of the human?

Alas, a resumption of the tradition is difficult here, for philosophy has broken with its own continuity. Since the Romantic era it has questioned the very tradition of reason which bore and carried it. For Nietzsche, thinking since Socrates has been a continual betrayal of the productive forces of the human. That is why, in his prospectus of a “philosophy of the future”, he takes recourse to pre- and extra-philosophical sources such as the Pre-Socratics and aesthetic visions of genius. He thereby suggests his relinquishment of the academic tradition of philosophy and conceals how much he indeed did learn from Socrates and Plato, Aristotle and Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant and Hegel and, above all, from his contemporaries Feuerbach, Stirner, Lange or Dühring.

For Heidegger, then, Nietzsche's revolt against philosophy is part of that metaphysical tradition which has led us to nowhere and made the catastrophe of the present possible. Heidegger believes that the philosophers have thought only of the human, but that they have constructed him after the model of things. In the face of **Seiendem** they have overlooked Being. The truth in the "clearing of Being" is distorted and concealed by a great many individual things which deceive all the more when humans have a part in them. Therein lies the disaster of science and technology. Through the capacities of these, humans see themselves in maximum magnification and fail to recognize that they are nothing at all if they are not carried by Being.

It is apparent that a Being concealed and distorted by science and technology cannot be revealed by these. For this reason, Heidegger shuns even his own philosophical thought and turns to the poets, so that at least a notion of how Being encloses us may be won from the all-inclusive signification of their speech. The language of poetry has us understand Being as a meaning which carries All; and if philosophical thought has any task left for it, it is limited to remaining open for this meaning of Being. That is an insight worth taking note of.

5. *Where God was, Being should be.* It cannot elude the sober observer, however, that in seeking to open himself to that which he calls Being, Heidegger cultivates the very expectations which were once connected with God. The unheard-of aspect of the concept of God lies therein, that this concept seeks to make intelligible that Whole which is *a priori* unintelligible. Within the Whole, Being - which encloses all **Seiende** (Beings) - is placed in the perspective of meaning. This meaning is of course related to the human understanding of meaning. But the concept of God is connected with the unreasonable demand that one reverse the deep-rooted viewpoint of the human in order to see the human from the perspective of the Whole. Meaning, which nonetheless remains fundamental, is only the medium in which the human being appears before God.

It is in the concept of God, then, that the human arrives at the greatest thinkable distance from itself. Before God, the human does not just become estranged with itself, as is the case in all Knowing and Doing; here, the human is confronted by the absolute Other. And yet human beings speak to this Other as if it were of their own kind, and assume

that everything depends upon them, even when they stand before the annihilating greatness of the Whole. Only in the face of God does the human being have a chance to assert himself confidently before that Absolute which surpasses him totally. It is this personalization of the Whole, so suspect to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which made it possible to hold the unreasonable demand of the concept of God within the view-point of human understanding of meaning.

In this way, the philosophical tradition makes it possible to talk about God. No particular evidence is required to discover that Heidegger himself has nothing better to say on this point. He only presents his message with the demand of unconditional exit. He would like to subvert and infiltrate two-thousand years of philosophy so that he might begin again at the point where Socrates, Plato and Aristotle once began. In order to avoid their supposedly wrong path, however, he abstains from that manner of understanding which arranges things. As Heidegger correctly observed, humans do not just assert themselves theoretically in this mode of thinking. Because human self-assertion in concepts distorts the Being which Heidegger seeks, he recommends letting everything stand and lie in order to devote oneself completely to listening to language. Only in this way can one overcome the “obliviousness of Being” (**Seinsvergessenheit**); only in this way may the actual presence of Being be felt. As for the rest: All that we must do is to wait. That is the very thing which Heidegger calls “Guarding Being”.

**6. *The decay of the discipline.*** The greatness of traditional European philosophy long consisted in its ability to sovereignly integrate positions such as Heidegger's, in which this very tradition of philosophy is placed at the end of its history. There have always been thinkers, dreamers and penitents who demanded a radical rejection of everything. They found their place in the philosophical tradition as prophets, preachers and poets, and contributed substantially to the tradition of hermeticism, mysticism and poetics. Under the conditions of modernity, the release of theology and aesthetics for free disposition and the dis-attachment of faith and knowledge allowed a composed treatment of the thought of extreme dissenters.

It is understandable that Heidegger, whose ambitions were famously inordinate, should have wanted to avoid a disciplinary de-limitation of his thought. The fact that there were and are individuals who carry on

his personal claim by either canonizing him or spinning him for one more revolution shows how far the decay of the philosophical tradition has progressed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The self-destruction of thought is so far advanced that there is no longer an independent awareness of the tradition. The possibility to approach the future of the human with closely examined components of a tradition is thus lost. When all which has passed is patently rejected, there is nothing left to do other than radically begin anew. Such a beginning stands necessarily at ground zero, in the face of nothing.

7. *“The park for humans.”* Most recently it has been suggested that there is indeed a way from Heidegger to the future of the human. Peter Sloterdijk has proclaimed his vision of a great garden in which humans are supposed to be able to cultivate themselves somehow and simultaneously guard Being. It remains unclear how this is supposed to be done: “Rules” were announced in the title of this proclamation, but they were not to be found in the text. Nothing occurred to the visionary concerning the design of his “park for humans”, despite the fact that an important natural scientist developed far-reaching ideas on a “garden of the human” years ago. The discussion of details was too tedious for this “leftist Heideggerian” (a self-appellation) anyway; for him it was more important to become enraged over his critics.

Aside from the considerable technical, political and ethical effort that a project such as the “park for humans” would cost, we may assume that it would fail for the simple reason that a protected reserve in the history of Being is hardly attractive. If such self-ordered isolation were really desirable, we would have long since become Epicureans. Nevertheless, among Heidegger’s followers one finds the opinion that the “Letter on Humanism” points a way into the future of Being – a way which could also bring salvation for human beings.

8. *A letter for his own cause.* One cannot dispute that Heidegger’s letter intends a kind of salvation. It is not the salvation of mankind, however, but of one single person: himself. The farewell to Humanism through the history of Being thus gains more profound significance: The doctrine which Heidegger developed compensatorily after the failure of his political career is summarized here in generally understandable form. He who was rejected as the “Führer” of the “Führer” and interpreter of existence (**Dasein**) reasserts himself as the messenger of Being. That is to

say: A thinker who has been greatly disappointed by the course of events throws himself into a position in which it is absolutely impossible that he might be disappointed. He does so by claiming that it is a disaster for the history of Being if anything particular is done at all.

This position would be unassailable if Heidegger were really to have done absolutely nothing. But, to the contrary, he writes this “letter”. In the letter there is not only a warning against the metaphysical representation of human interests, but also the concrete interest of a professor who has been suspended from his duties. Doesn’t the author of this letter stand accused – and justly so – of representing National Socialism in a prominent position? Certainly. And yet, isn’t he free of all personal responsibility if he can show that the ideology of the Nazis was the metaphysical-historical consequence of old European obliviousness to Being? Wasn’t he indeed the one who warned us of the disaster of this forgetfulness?

And who is making the terrific accusations against him? Is it not finally the victors of the Second World War, the Americans who are stationed in the country and the Communists who have returned to Germany with the Soviet occupational force? He seems to have believed this. But are they really justified in making such accusations against him? Don’t they belong to the very same configuration as Nazi-ism in the history of Being?

These are the concrete questions of existence with which Heidegger supported his abstract question of Being. In complete contradiction to his own suggestions concerning the history of Being, Heidegger seems quite confident in his discussion of certain so-called historical facts: In the “Letter on Humanism” we read that “Communism” and “Americanism” enforce the same “procedure of unconditional production”, of ruthless “reification of the Real”. Both are supposed to contribute at least as much to the decline of the greatness of thought as National Socialism, for which Heidegger uses the noble gloss of “Nationalism”.

One is not mistaken, then, in calling the “Letter on Humanism” an attempt at denazification. Out of respect for humanity we shall abstain from morally judging this process after so many years. As far as the philosophical content of the letter is concerned, we may conclude that it

is dictated by interests for which, according to the new conditions of the history of Being, there should no longer be any room. The author is not even on a par with his own argumentation.

**9. *The limitation of Humanism.*** Barbarism in the treatment of the past did not take on the degree of frivolity which was later reached when media theorists reduced Humanism to a series of letters. It is in any case astounding how little Heidegger actually is able to bring against classical Humanism. Indeed, who would deny that Humanism has become problematic through century-long employment in the services of antiquity, of literature, art and philology, and then for the purposes of universities and schools, and finally for educational clubs and political parties?

Nietzsche drew attention to the misuse of Humanism repeatedly with his warning against the fixed establishment of the meaning of humanity. Having an education in an humanistic Gymnasium behind him, the pathos of Friedrich Schiller within him, and the odious colleagues from the philological Humaniora clubs beside him, Nietzsche derisively rejects the solemn Sunday Humanism of his contemporaries. “Oh Voltaire! Oh Humanity! Oh Nonsense!” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 35) But that does not keep him from holding fast to that which he considers the human advantage, namely a “free spirit”. For Nietzsche, the “great exemplars” of the human race emerge as “sovereign individuals”. Without the “responsibility” which is developed into an individual style in these exemplars, without their “truthfulness”, “bravery” and “justice”, Nietzsche would not have been able to have Zarathustra speak of the future of the human.

Concerning all this we find nothing by Heidegger. He only criticizes the concept of Humanism from the viewpoint of his end scenario in the history of Being and rejects all those aspects of it – but only those aspects – which he already declared disastrous in relation to philosophy. “Humanism” is for him just a word, which could just as well stand for “metaphysics”, “subjectivism” or “science”. The word in the title of his letter has the simple function of relieving the author from the usual humanitarian expectations. Moreover, he uses the occasion to give his French correspondent a lesson in the history of Being. The pre-war arrogance with which Heidegger, in 1936, once sought to show the

French how much better the Germans understand Descartes, remained unchanged.

The heavy-handed monotony with which Heidegger articulates his critique also persisted. This is an indication of how foreign the literary aspect of Humanism was to him. Whereas Nietzsche could caricature Humanism with a light pen and in the very style of the Humanists, Heidegger brings out the same old heavy artillery again and again, blasting away at the very fundament of Being.

**10.** *Not a word on the body or life.* Heidegger is concrete in one accusation only: That Humanism conceives the human from the side of its anthropological and biological conditions. This, according to Heidegger, is an unacceptable reduction. In order to counter it, the thinker of Being would like to establish the “*humanitas of the homo humanus*” (“the humanity of the cultured human being”). Naturally, this humanity is not to be understood “in a metaphysical sense”, but “in the service of the truth of Being”.

According to Heidegger’s own premises, however, we cannot even know what this last humanity is supposed to be. In any case, one can hardly make the claim that classical Humanism conceived humanity too exclusively from the biological and anthropological perspective. Heidegger’s only evidence for this is limited to the expression *animal rationale*, into which the term “living being” apparently imports too much biological content.

That is a curious reservation. For in considering the tradition of Humanism critically, one could only seriously found the opposite accusation, namely that within this tradition there has been far too little thought concerning the animalistic part of the *homo humanus*. The Humanists have concentrated themselves almost exclusively on the Rational in the human being, and have left the Animal quite unconsidered. Only in this way could things come to the quite unintelligent primacy of intelligence, which encumbers philosophy to this very day – to the point of having established a gap between the natural sciences and humanities.

Heidegger apparently does not find this headiness of Humanism problematic. He rather exacerbates it by giving us the impression that

biological and anthropological dimensions of the human cannot play any role at all. The only conclusion his polemics permit is that he would exclude from philosophy the inquiry into both internal and external conditions of life.

In so doing, he distorts his philosophical perspective on the future of the human. We may be sure that human beings are essentially defined in terms of their capacities, and that these capacities cannot even be understood without the intellect. However, following the successes of the biological sciences, we can have no doubt that *homo sapiens* is and shall remain a part of natural life – indeed, *especially* in respect to the intellectual abilities of our species. So long as philosophy refuses to accept this insight, it will play no role in the debate concerning the future of the human.

**11. *Polemics from the fringe.*** If one considers Heidegger's thought after his so-called "turn" as a totality, its agonistic character becomes immediately apparent. Heidegger makes polemics in and against everything and attempts to outdo everyone by taking a standpoint beyond everything else. Thus he remains as hard to determine as he is to reach. His polemics emanate from the background, or rather from behind: Everything is susceptible to attack, with the exception of the attacker himself.

This has certainly been one of the reasons for the attraction Heidegger's fundamental critique has exercised on habitual rebels, radical revolutionaries and ascetic nay-sayers. Yet the cunning of this total critique of all things existing lies therein, that its total negativity is only meant historically. Even if thinking on Being can, upon the basis of its own premises, support no concept of history, it remains nevertheless historically grounded so long as a total change is in sight. On the other hand: Though the caesura which is required and which changes all comes from the great beyond of history, when it finally *does* come, it breaks history's continuity.

Hence the present could not be more pregnant with history, but if it should someday give birth, it would lose all history. The present carries the soft glow of a future emancipated from all being things (**Seiendem**); and in the future, the Unhidden which is truth appears on its own – if one only reverently remains silent.

The meditative character of this waiting for the end of the obliviousness to Being follows a tradition of grand European models of contemplation and mysticism. The immersion in oneself offers a way out of the business of existence in every instant of peace. All one needs for the *vita completa* is a self-confident existence in time. And the solitude which is implied thereby even offers the prospect of re-discovering the supposedly dead God in the greatest intimacy and as very much alive.

But it is just this which Heidegger finds suspect. For, in the first place, he has no concept of independent and self-reflexive individuality. Furthermore, he rejects any path chosen under the conditions of the old metaphysics, in order to relieve his clientele of certain expectations. In the waiting room of Being one only knows his complaints, but cannot hope to be relieved of these in any particular way. To expressly be oriented on something is already too much. And the worst possible thing one could do is doing something in particular.

This is an utterly hopeless situation which only appears otherwise because Heidegger knows how to make the impression that things cannot remain this way forever. Since everything changes sometime, the obliviousness to Being must somehow also end.

In order to at least connect some kind of hope to this promise one would still have to know what it is like to remind oneself of Being. Unfortunately, no one can tell us anything about this. In a strict sense – according to Heidegger’s own criteria – the clearing of being is an illusion. It has the effect, however, that many people delude themselves concerning the pure negativity of Heidegger’s thinking. Having Being in the hand is more important to them than having Beings (**Seiende**) in the bush, although they know that Being cannot be caught.

**12. The inner paralysis.** We need only to recall the terrible events of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in order to understand why Heidegger found followers. He articulated a widely spread mood: This is the key to his importance. Although pure negativity seems to be confirmed by the historical facts, it cannot be sustained in the course of human existence. In light of this, the sudden change to an abstract positivity of memory becomes understandable.

And yet this can only be valid for the moment of its first expression. When one feels exactly as the doctor says, one cannot disagree with him in the moment he utters his diagnosis. When however the *prognosis* remains unconfirmed for decades, doubt is in order, even if the mood has not improved. We may continue to heave a Heideggerian sigh with the words “Only a God can save us”, or we may have the presumption to be so cynical as his student, Gadamer, and claim “My only hope is fear.” This will change nothing about the fact that the political victory over the totalitarian ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is due neither to waiting nor to the fear of the desperate.

The collapse of the totalitarian world views under the influence of which Heidegger thought is a significant precedent; it provided for a hopeful end to the old century. Each of us can have a hand in making amends for this century by the manner in which we lead our lives: The safeguarding of democracy succeeds only through active participation on behalf of its ends. The protection of life must be pursued in a continual effort, which is to be re-doubled in the same degree to which the human capacity to destroy life increases. Science and art spring from a striving after the expansion of knowledge and experience; and in both the demand for the expression and shaping of one’s own existence is raised. That meaning of life which we assume when we raise children, tend fields, build machines or write and criticize texts can only be positively asserted when it is made into an example in the action of self-aware individuals.

None of this is to be found in Heidegger. Because he does not entrust human beings with the shaping of their own future – indeed, because he sees this very kind of self-determination as *the* disaster – he is silent on the future of the human. He refuses to offer an answer to any of the three questions as to what we may know, do and hope for. He holds that the search after human nature is fundamentally misguided. To search for problems, possibly even to search for problems which may be solved – this, he thinks, is below him. And because he develops no alternatives, the only thing which remains of his thought are question-marks placed after questions which no one need ask.

Heidegger wrote and spoke and acted in the name of the only future which seems to have meant anything to him, namely the future of his own work. Yet that which was most important to him in this work, his thought, seems thereby peculiarly paralyzed. Perhaps we would do him

justice in grasping the inner paralysis of his thought as the essential expression of a truly terrible century.