



The Human: A Voyage around Margolis' Ontology

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“.. we are in danger of...
losing our philosophical moorings”
Joseph Margolis, *The Arts and the
Definition of the Human: Toward a
Philosophical Anthropology* (143).

In two recent works, both with copyright 2009 –*On Aesthetics: An Unforgiving Introduction and The Arts and the Definition of the Human*-- Joseph Margolis deals in depth with Philosophical Anthropology. The books are wide-ranging and each is searchingly concerned with what it **is** to be a Human Being. Here, a brief list of attributes --outlining what sort of creatures we might be said to be-- is given, while each of the seventeen saliencies Margolis notes --in a particular section of the *book The Arts and the Definition...*(19)-- is looked at in a simple fashion to help shape up for us certain minima to be taken into account whenever we speak of what kind of creatures humans are. Without such an ontology constantly in the background of all our speculations, such speculations are likely to miss whatever mark they set out to strike. What we are like, obviously, constantly infects whatever we say and do –and how we view the world about us-- in whatever sphere of inquiry we make. We must know what the narrator is like before we decide how to take his/her narratives.

This essay does not intend to ape Nabokov's *Pale Fire* –where a 1,000 line poem gives rise to a mammoth and unlikely explication. Neither does it try to be *obscurum per obscurius* to end up like Byron's Coleridge –“Explaining Metaphysics to the nation/ I wish he would explain his Explanation” (*Don Juan* Dedication, lines 15-16).¹ Still less does it wish to compete with Alexandre Kojève on Hegel --and influence a whole flock of small-time intellectuals, while turning the writer himself into a French civil servant. Finally, there is no substitute for taking the whole ocean cruise with the two books themselves. No. The purpose here is a modest one; to make plain, to spell out, and to offer a small intellectual voyage around shoals and seas too often ignored by so many well-respected philosophers of the past and present. It hopes to give some insight into what a human being is. Without some inkling of this, as Margolis remarks, “... we are in danger of ... losing our philosophical moorings” (*The Arts...* 143). This brief review is intended, in part, to get us back safely ashore with our philosophical bark

¹ Just for the archives, Margolis sees the metaphysical change in the human animal take place when we acquire a language and, thereafter, a self. This enculturating conversion of babies into people is a radical, metaphysical change, though, of course, it is also quite natural. This taking-on of the cultural by infants is part of what is meant by the “natural artificiality of man”, which Helmuth Plessner has scanned, and which Marjorie Grene has so christened. Here, it should be borne in mind that language itself is part of a larger “lingual” human world which includes other cultural forms apart from language –the dance, music, cooking, and the rest, as Paul Ricouer has noted. The emphasis on language as our paradigm cultural achievement must not be taken to belittle deaf mutes who are, of course, just as lingually gifted as the rest of us, when not more so.

firmly secured, and, at least, bobbing at anchor. Once in port, the final section of the essay briefly poses a few questions Margolis' ontology (our ontology) might raise.

Margolis is often at pains to show that artworks –our “utterances”– must, to a very large extent, share the same ontology as us, their creators, the same sort of “being-ness” as people acting as artists. It therefore may not come amiss to quote his own succinct ontology of art:

An artwork is a historicized utterance that is physically embodied, culturally emergent, possessing Intentionally qualified properties that are determinable but not determinate in the way mere material properties are said to be.

(On Aesthetics 136)²

In brief, this definition should also fit the human being since we share the same ontology as our artworks. So, there we have everything in a nutshell. In what follows, this succinct definition will, it is hoped, be made as simple as possible –as Einstein said that we should make all things– but “no simpler”. Meanwhile, four things need to be kept clear: 1) nothing surprisingly new is to be expected for we are dealing with humans and we are humans; 2) whatever is said of “human being” should be generally acceptable if the 17 attributes are indeed “on the ball”; 3) all the attributes listed intermingle and overlap because all are present at once to form the selfsame creature, that is, to form us; 4) the interpretations on offer here might be erroneous.³

That the whole of what follows is not simply an outline of the “bleeding obvious” might be assented to if we consider that –throughout most of human history and still today--human being has been looked at primarily from only two vantage points. There is the religious and the “scientific” way of viewing ourselves. Generally, and pejoratively, put, these views might be dubbed “the ecstatic” and “the reductive”. The twain have been at the helm this many a-year –we have been guided either by Genesis or the gene. However, if we accept that people are “historied” and that they have evolved from earlier life-forms --if we accept, that is roughly, Vico, Hegel and Marx's thesis, on the one hand, Darwin's, on the other-- then what a human being **is** could not have even been conceptualized before the late 18th century --on the one side-- and 1859 or so --on the other. In short, what a human being is can only have been even vaguely theorized within the last 150 years. That is not a long time. If true, that would suggest that certain “golden oldies” –Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Madison, Hume, Kant, for instance-- might not really have known much about human ontology, about “human nature”. It could throw in doubt many of their very smoothest assertions and pontifications.⁴

² One difference between artworks and humans is, of course, the aging-process. Margolis has considered this in *Selves and Other Texts* (University Park, Penn State U., 2001).

³ John Dewey held that when philosophy drifts apart from vital issues, becomes over-technical, and is full of controversy and disagreement then, it is “a pretty sure sign that somewhere on the route a compass has been lost and a chart thrown away” (*Later Works*, 16: 249-50). General agreement on what is said here might be expected if what is said is indeed correct. If it is, it might easily be checked, since it is open to any individual to review himself and his fellows, in as generous a way as s/he sees fit..

⁴ One might object that Buffon's *Histoire naturelle de l'homme* (1749) had already dealt extensively with the human as animal or that Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798) counts against our 1859 launching point. This would be a mistake. It was precisely because Descartes's dualism was so much in the air which Buffon breathed, that Buffon could treat of the animal “man”, the “body”, without risking the wrath of the ecclesiastical authorities. Both works are synchronistic. Neither work allows for the genuine novelty --for real historicized change in or between species-- which Darwin was the first to set forth.

To get right to the nub then, for Margolis, to be a human being is minimally to be: 1. artifactual 2. socially constituted 3. historicized 4. enlanguaged and encultured 5. "second natured" 6. real only within some culture's collective life 7. embodied through the cultural transformation of the infant members of *Homo sapiens* 8. originally or externally *gebildet* 9. *sui generis* 10. emergent through mastering a first language and whatever aptitudes such mastery makes possible; 11. indissolubly hybrid, uniting biological and cultural processes and powers; 12. capable therefore of hybrid acts or "utterances" (speaking, making, doing, creating) incarnate in the *materiae* of any part of physical nature; 13. self-transforming or internally *gebildet* through its second-natured powers; 14. empowered and constrained by the collective history it shares with similarly emergent creatures; 15 capable, thus, of functioning as a self, a person, a subject, an agent, within an aggregate of similarly formed selves, that is, free and responsible, capable of causally effective (incarnate) initiatives, capable of self-reference, of reporting its inner thoughts and experience in a public way, of understanding the utterances and acts of similarly endowed selves; 16 inherently interpretable and subject to change by being interpreted; 17 not a natural kind entity but a history, or an entity that has a history rather than a nature, or a nature that is no more than a history --a history determinable but not determinate.⁵

1. artifactual.

Like a work of art, humans are fashioned by the culture and the environment into which they are born. One of the most basic ingredients in this artifactual formation would be the language each of us must internalize from birth onwards. The characteristics of language, then, are a good analogy for the characteristics of selves, as are artworks. An artifact is something molded, created, constructed but is without material, embodied, resistant. This "artifactual" aspect of the human is, of course, totally "natural" in that humans are natural creatures, it is just that they are formed in, what Marjorie Grene has called, the "social uterus", where the surrounding society is like the pouch of the kangaroo.

The artifactual of the human and the cultural world, in general, came to prominence at the time of --and just after-- the French Revolution when it was clearly realized that men could dethrone divine kings at will, could even remake the calendar and the time categories which men had lived by. The artifactual nature of the human is a good place to start because it is perhaps the key to all that follows. Artifacts, when chanced upon, are immediately interpreted and, usually judged as to their historical period and provenance. We expect artifacts to make some kind of sense. Almost instinctively, we assume they have significance and will "speak" to us.

⁵ Joseph Margolis, *The Arts and the Definition of the Human: Toward a Philosophical Anthropology*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009. Prologue, 19. A companion list concerning the Intentional, that is the cultural world -and the beings which inhabit such a world- may be found on page 191 of the 2009 *Aesthetics* book. It reads:

(the ubiquitous cultural world reveals): its public, inseparable, emergent embodiment in physical and biological nature; its hybrid, artifactual actuality; its historied construction; its sui generis utterance; its legibility among selves (ourselves) who are similarly uttered in the "Bildung of consciousness", made apt for creation and interpretation by the mastery of a language and a culture, forewarned thereby to live within the flux of history.

This comes to about 9 or 11 ingredients, depending on how we make the divisions and what we wish to emphasize.

With a person –the “human artifact”-- these semiotic reactions are even more pronounced. With the human artifact, we can usually also ascertain facts about its creator; we ask about a person’s parents –or some scientific substitute thereof. With the use of the adjective “artifactual”, therefore, we are instantaneously drawn into a cultural world, a world of *poesis*, of creativity, of meanings, of history.

2. socially constituted

Outside of some community, there are no humans. It is the long, the very long, period we spend being weaned and groomed that makes us a socially formed entity, even if partly hard-wired –perhaps the crawling to upright toddling to straight walking of young children is hard-wired. We are, however, much more the products of a mother’s “goo-gooing”, and “baby tuckoo-ing”, and other adults presenting us with symbols, tasks, forms of behaviour to imitate, and the rest, than are any other species. In Aristotle’s terms, we are “Proton Zooon”, the political animal.

Our social constitution reaches even to our possible forms of thought, as Wittgenstein pointed out, a man who does not want his child to believe in fairies or witches simply does not use the word “fairy” or “witch” to the child ever. The “fairies” each of us believe in are a “natural product” of which words –and their concomitant concepts-- have surrounded us from birth. Though we are indeed socially constituted – and many, as Bourdieu has shown, try their best to simply make the outside world conform to the social world which made them as children-- we are not thereby wholly determined. We are imaginately free to reconstitute ourselves and the social world about us, to borrow from other “worlds”, and so on (see Section 15). C. S. Pierce, with his doctrine of “irritations” --doubt and the search for certainty-- offers but one convincing hypothesis of how scientific investigation gets underway with humans, and how real creative change might take place.⁶

3. historicized.

For the historicized, we must surely begin with Giambattista Vico and his “New Science”. Vico’s principal contributions include the pointing out that --since Man made Civil Society-- only Man could understand society and, possibly, society was the only thing which Man could, in fact, understand. God made nature, so to ever truly understand nature was a thing beyond us, for Vico. Vico thus succeeded in turning the priorities and dreams of the scientific revolution --stretching from Galileo and Bacon in the 16th century through Descartes and Newton, in the 17th, and on to Kant and even Comte in the 18th and 19th centuries-- clearly and paradoxically upon their heads. Man could not understand “nature”, the “history of civil societies” was the only episteme possible for Man, being both its creature and its designer. The reason why “scientific” thought had flourished and history languished –Vico held-- was because, like the human eye, it is easier for us to see and investigate those things outside us than to investigate our societies, ourselves and our inner workings. The historicized theme was taken up more amply by Hegel and then Marx. It would seem to follow from the “strong” version of this theme that any “science” we might achieve, or knowledge of nature, will likewise be subject to the historicized “nature” of the human inquirer, the

⁶ The phrase “baby tuckoo” is taken from the first page of James Joyce’s *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce was better at capturing the way adults speak to children and socially constitute them than most of us, hence his usage is adopted here.

scientist himself. So, there might simply be 18th century science and scientists, 19th century, 20th century, 21st century science and scientists, but there could never be just science, just scientists, the hermeneutic circle, for one thing, would preclude it.

Still, categories like the 18th and 19th centuries are but artificial, human divisions, and it must be admitted that the 18th century –or Classical Athenian society, for that matter—did finally result in us. There is a continuity in history. How this comes about is the historian's task to explain. That there is no connection between epistemes --what is here called the "strong" version of historicism-- was embraced by historians such as Ranke, but it is hardly convincing. We need imagination and interpretation as much in every day life as in historical narrative, too "strong" an historicism would make it impossible to even unite "ourselves of today" with "us-as-the-babes-of-yesteryear".

A much more likely tale –for history in the large-- is unfolded by Michel Foucault who sees some regime of knowledge/power --perhaps the new practices of organization, regimentation, systematization, within a society's prison system, at a given time-- beginning on the edges of a particular, historical society, then slowly spreading throughout the body social like a virus, and taking the place of an earlier regime of knowledge/power. The new formation is only clearly recognized as such by an historical scientist's reconstruction of past events. The earlier, already in-place regime would be the historical *a priori*, which Foucault sees as an historicized replacement for Kant's ahistorical *a priori*. The historicized human condition we are all heirs to might be now known as the "Hegelian encumbrance" –meaning by that, the inescapable historical context of the human thinker, and also the **now** necessary-looking nature of the happenings of the past which, in reality, were full of change and accident and contingency.⁷

The historicized then refers to the fact that the human is a creature of history and a creature containing history in the bones, as it were. A Renaissance baby or an Ancient Athenian infant is not like the child born today. Their world is not ours. The one may have been enshrouded in magic, in witchcraft, Popes, the Borgias, Leonardo, the other, in Oracles, Homer, lewd and Olympian deistic struggles. However, we make an imaginative attempt to fuse our horizon with theirs, to get into their minds and their lifestyles, to create convincing, reasonable, historical accounts of what their world "must" have been like. As Vico said, we can do this because they were humans and so are we, together we have created the Intentional, cultural worlds of the human way of being.

The idea of the historied lack of essence of the human is a new one. It was born and nurtured only by Hegel then Marx. In the 18th century, any baby was a Universal Baby and all babies had always been alike. There was then a Human Nature, changeless, timeless. Kant's Mankind has no history, and no biology, for the matter of that. Suddenly, there was nothing but intentional time ticking within us all, making us subject to the fashions of the thought of the moment, of the now-seemingly-structured nature of things, in their spatial and symbolic --man-made-- orders. The world we are born into is already parsed, divided, passed-judgment upon by all those adults around

⁷ What the hermeneutic circle –the term is Gadamer's from *Truth and Method*-- demonstrates is that there must be a "fusion of horizons" whenever we review history, a melding of our present and the imaginatively summed-up past. History is always viewed from the vantage of some ever-changing present, and, as Gadamer notes, horizons alter as we sail towards them, the horizon itself is an imaginary line which is never quite reached.

That "chance" is inherent in the nature of things too is wonderfully illustrated by C. S. Pierce who argued that if the universe was the result of a haphazard meeting of chemicals, atoms, or whatever, then life itself must originally have been the result of a chance concatenation of circumstances too. From this it follows that chance must be a real ingredient of our universe -- and of our world-- and should always be allowed for in all our speculations.

us, similarly encumbered by their own predecessors. Baby clothes change and so do the babies swaddled within them. And, if human thought changes, then all things -- every last thing, our bodies (very, very slowly, *pace* Darwin), our emotions, our sexuality, our paradigms, our reality, our world --are all subject to change --at least insofar as we humans are concerned. By the same token, all things human are "historicized", are part of the flux of history. Nothing but nothing escapes this condition. And, of course, Historicism is incompatible with any Universalism.

4. enlanguaged and encultured

To be "enlanguaged" is simply to be able to speak a language, and also to think in that language. Thinking of ourselves --of our relations to others, of their opinions of us, of the pop songs which flood our minds, of the countless scripts and dialogues from a thousand TV shows and movies which swim about in the brain (or the central nervous system), in language-- we create a vision, a view, a vague and shifting idea of what it is to be ourselves. This vague idea of self underlies our every conscious move, though we are often not fully conscious of what it entails, of what we are "really" like. We are certainly never like to "us" what we are like to "him" and to "her", and to those others that view us from the "outside", as it were. In spite of this, the concept of the self, the "me", seems to necessarily entail some idea of the Other. Were this not the case, there could never even be any pretence at "objectivity". The objective is our own opinion of what the Other might view as her Other's viewpoint.

"Encultured" flows from being "enlanguaged". The culture comes with the language, but so too does "encultured" come with gestures, other artifacts, sounds, real emotions --at first mimicked then internalized, only later, externalized-- colour combinations, the pictures, images and icons which swirl before us from our first opening our childish eyes, onwards. Meanwhile, our "go-goos" have turned to language, and we attempt to sort, to analyze, to make all the whirligig of all that surrounds us make sense and to make sense too of what that is which is "us" -- tumbling around and dervishing through all this mad cluster and kaleidoscope of shifting hubbub. We search out meanings; everything is a potential sign to be deciphered. We set things in a narrative to give them some kind of form and shape, some form of coherence.

We become a part of a tradition, but, as Wittgenstein again noted, there is no tradition to which we belong. To formulate such a tradition, we must get outside it -- something impossible-- we must put it on hold --something inconceivable-- while we look back on it, look it over. The tradition is that which is not, and never stops changing even as the changing "I" (that is me) attempts to assess such a traditon's myriad whirlpooling parts. Whatever I choose consciously to emphasize as "my tradition" can never be anything but an idealization, an abstraction, or else a stereotyping of what --at the time of considering my tradition-- seems most salient, most typical, most "noble", worthwhile, "timeless" in what I consider my group's way of life.⁸

⁸ While we belong to a tradition, but there is no tradition to which we belong, so too do languages appear to follow rules, and human behaviour itself usually seems to us somewhat rule-like --but it never is nomothetic. The problem is, of course, that all the rules change and there is no rule for the making of rules. Even such hallowed "sacred cows" as the laws of physics take a bashing in Nancy Cartwright's *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (Clarendon, 1983).

5. "second natured"

Some might object to the use of the term, even though it is placed within quotation marks or scare quotes. If the argument is that humans have no natures but only histories, then, talking of a "second nature" surely only serves to confuse things. The phrase however serves as ballast. We are indeed natural animals which is why human medicine is a generalized practice. The body needs emphasizing as does the naturalism of the Margolisian ontology or else we should be back once more with the angels or with disembodied sign-systems floating in the conceptual winds. So, there is a natural starting point, as with pre-linguistic infants. There is a natural succession to biological processes, we are earthly creatures at all times.

Our original, particular animal make-up –our first nature, if you will-- is itself a little out of the ordinary amongst primates, as the early 18th century "naturalists" first brought to attention. Blumenbach, for instance, listed parts of this make-up as follows: a bowl-shaped pelvis; hands that are not, like those of apes, occasionally used solely as grasping devices, but are anatomically structured to be grasping devices; close-set, regular teeth, rather than threatening canines and incisors; sexual availability and eagerness at all seasons; a shortened gestation time; a constant supply of infants, requiring a long period of enculturation (Blumenbach, 1775). More modern commentators would add –Kurt Vonnegut Jnr. with chagrin-- a big brain. So much for the human animal and each of us may imagine what each of these physical characteristics might imply. These characteristics, nevertheless, are nowhere near – are light-years distant-- from the importance our second-nature makes.⁹

We develop and take on cultural form in the "social uterus". The internalizing of a culture, a form of life, gives us a "second-nature", distinct from –but continuous with, forever interlarded, intertwined, intermixed with-- our animal nature. This second-nature is our thick --dense, yet fragile and easily broken-- cultural world. Each cultural world may appear "home" to the individuals comprising it. It might even appear as something relatively timeless. It is slow to change and so may take on the deceptive feel of permanence, while those born within its envelope often do whatever they can do to prevent its altering or to prevent its being altered –a Sisyphean task.¹⁰

Yet, again looking backwards, we see how inexorably the cultural world alters -- from generation to generation-- so that one's great-grandparents' lives seem almost completely remote from our own. Still, the social nature we assume, incorporate, becomes us, the very largest part of our own self. In considering the "second-natured" aspect of humans, it comes as no surprise that, throughout history, the two types of people most honoured and raised on pedestals should be either those who have

⁹ Possibly, the most that can be made of the human body's contribution to our social and cultural behaviour has been --somewhat unconvincingly-- examined by Elias Canetti, followed by Marshall McLuhan

¹⁰ Language change throughout history is slow but is inexorably real. What prospects does this not threaten "scientism" with? The historical fact of linguistic change is never sufficiently taken notice of in either linguistics or in linguistic philosophy or indeed in philosophy in general. No matter how much academies and grammarians might struggle to hold back the tide, all natural languages undergo real change. Structuralism was one particularly inept attempt to deny this. But, one need only consider such phenomena as lexical, phonetic, phonotological, spelling, semantic and syntactic change --or try to read Chaucer-- to appreciate the fact of historical, linguistic metamorphosis. Both the forms and the sounds of languages change through history - -though no one individual or group of individuals deliberately sets out to effect such change. Here, historical language change might be considered analogous to real changes in all aspects of the cultural life of humans. What bearing might this have on ideas of progress and the various would-be universalisms of our time? Language change cannot be denied and cannot be accommodated within such schemes.

excelled with the body –athletes and those revealing a great capacity for physical endurance-- and master and mistress manipulators of the cultural –the artists, and those who capture part of the significance of their own times as that significance flies.

6. real only within some culture's collective life

In *Historied Thought, Constructed World* (California, 1995), Margolis makes a useful terminological distinction between what “exists” and what is “real”. There, he suggests we use “exists” for things which show “secondness” --a materiality, a concreteness --such as trees, rocks, bodies, and the like, manifest-- which physically obstructs the movement of other similar existents. “Real”, he proposes, be reserved for those other, intensional (i.e. non-extensional) things such as numbers, dreams, a transcendent God, or Asterix which –while they do not bodily, physically block movement-- do indeed affect thought and behaviour, and can play a causal role in human life.

Keeping this present, “real only within some culture's collective life” means that humans make their mark, are recognized, gain significance and meaning only amongst a group of similar beings who have also internalized --and then may externalize-- the language, gestures, systems of thought and ethics, the semiotic import of the various and the multifarious symbols common to that group. The reality of our lives will depend upon the reality of other beings who recognize us as having value for them and whom we recognize, in turn, as having value for us. Such recognition is so rapid as to be tantamount to spontaneous. Again, speech is the paradigm for we hear meanings when we are spoken to, **we do not hear sounds**.

7. embodied

Humans have bodies, they are material things. They are made up of skin, flesh, bones, blood, and the rest. This may seem obvious but Husserl's Transcendental Ego is not like this, nor is the “I” of Descartes' “Cogito”. The bodily part of the human is systematically underplayed or ignored or lamented by most religious thinkers too. Emphasis on the fact that we are animals, with adaptive, animal bodies, only truly comes into play, in the history of thought, with Darwin. It is an open question how much our bodies affect our thoughts --or even how thought is “produced by the body” and where exactly thinking, in its entirety, takes place. Just as we are embodied, so too must those things be which we create: our artworks, tools, artifacts, even our languages --which are embodied in sound. The human is not simply a body, however, it cannot be reduced to the matter of which it is made up. It is because this is so that the odd philosophical offshoot known as dualism took root. The question always lurked: What about the Divine in the human, in or over against the body?

8. originally or externally *gebildet*

Though even as foetuses and neonates we are full of genes, chemicals, cells -- and all those other “sounding” terms devised by humans to describe the make-up of themselves-- primarily we learn to become selves by being “constructed” by those already on the earth prior to our arrival. The self is “groomed” by the adult generation which is its initial social context. In a way, we are “licked into shape” by our ambient

cultures --as it was once thought that adult bears literally licked their cubs into shape with their tongues.

One stark physiological sign of this is the way in which it is physically impossible for "baby tuckoo-ing" adults to imitate the sounds babies seem to make, and, therefore, the baby is forced to mimic adult sounds if it wishes to "get the goodies". Thus, the adult native tongue forms even the most individualistic babe amongst us.

9. *sui generis*

So far as anyone knows, humans are the only creatures which reveal all of the attributes which are mentioned in Margolis' list. We are *sui generis*, that is, we are a genus apart, a one-of-a-kind sort of creature. Our physiological, animal nature --as we have observed-- is already a little out of the ordinary. It surely plays its part in our odd evolution and in what will prove salient for us. However, we are truly unique in that we have self-consciousness and critical awareness, and that we can formulate lists of our attributes, for instance. We make plans for the future and have a sophisticated time-consciousness, which no other animal seems either to do or to have. As Wittgenstein put it: "a dog can expect his master, but can he expect him tomorrow?" (quoted Grene, 72).

On the other hand, our distinctiveness and *sui generis*-ness is a natural development from other forms of animal life, our formation is a natural blossoming of -- and not a complete break with-- other life-forms. Many have made comparisons between us and the social insects --termites, bees, ants, wasps-- and between us and the great apes --bonobos, gorillas, chimpanzees. This is all to the good since it at least allows, and for the first time, a natural explanation of the human.

Still, the vast differences between our kind and other kinds also needs to be underlined, especially the cultural, the intentional, the self-critical, the historicized oddness of the human. It is because of this quirkiness of ours that scientisms fail, that no so-called "psychological laws" could ever be drawn up. All such would-be laws are disallowed because of historicism --sexuality, the mind, the psyche, forms of behaviour, thinking and feeling all change.¹¹

10. emergent through mastering a first language and whatever aptitudes such mastery makes possible

The "emergent" here refers to the natural process by which a human being or person emerges from what was before simply an *exemplum* of the species *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Once a baby begins to master its native tongue, she starts to take on individuality in that she can --with language or the lingual-- not only communicate to others but also commune with herself.

¹¹ One of the creepiest and unnerving of recent "pop-phenomena" is the immense proliferation of pseudo-scientific or scientific US TV series. These include: The Scully of "The X-Files"; "Bones"; "Numbers"; "CSI"; "Criminal Minds"; "House"; "Lie to Me". All these shows, to a greater or lesser extent, deny the cultural and the historical, and attempt to set up a-historical universalisms. They thus show that Feyerabend was, in part, correct when he dubbed "science" just another ideology or form of religion. Their popularity is ironic since they are obviously written by people who are not scientists at all and who rely on the imagination and the historical flux of language for their daily bread. The sharp break between the Scientist and ordinary people is a mid-Victorian curiosity, made fashionable by the dry-as-dust, "liberal but too a degree", John Stuart Mill.

A transformation has then taken place and, from now onwards, no human being can ever be reduced to either a body or simply an instance of the animal species *homo sapiens sapiens*. The aptitudes lingual mastery fires are variegated and include the ability to mold a unique self, perhaps even to dream for the first time, certainly to experience an intentional, future-oriented time sense nothing coextensive with physical, clock-measured time. A world of significances comes into being and becomes our being. We might recall here Marjorie Grene's trenchant observation that language's prime function is not communication but "the construction of a cultural world" (*A Philosophical Testament* 156). Here, we might add, this is the prime function of everything lingual and not simply language.

11. indissolubly hybrid, uniting biological and cultural processes and powers

A person is both an animal, a body and the site of semiotic significance, the "lived body" in Merleau Ponty's phrase. Attributes such as "smiling" or being "sad" can be rightly assigned people but could never be assigned any mere object, except via metaphorical anthropomorphism. This allows us to answer Wittgenstein's famous query --as to what remains if I subtract from the fact that I raise my arm, the fact that my arm goes up. The answer is "intentionality", human purposefulness, human will, volition, decision or desire. These are just as real as the physical arm and its position on high. The arm's going up can be biologically or mechanically accounted for, not so my raising my arm. The latter requires cultural processes and powers. Still, the single act is the result of the hybridity of the human.

The "indissolubly hybrid" --this is a chemical solution not a chemical mixture (bowing to Nietzsche's exasperation at the ubiquitously metaphorical)-- obviates all forms of dualism which have bedeviled philosophy, most virulently, since Descartes. In the same way as humans are bodies and significances, meanings, so too are their creations --not least, other humans in the form of offspring. Thus, a sculpture is not a piece, or pieces, of stone and nor is a cathedral. A painting is not canvas and paint. Poetry is not "words, words, words" --despite Hamlet's canny madness. Music is not noises --despite Mozart's judgment on the English. The artworks which the human "artworks" utter --creations people make-- are as indissolubly hybrid as they are themselves. Thus --despite innumerable, rearguard, analytic philosophers of Art-- *finis* is now written to both dualism and reductionism.¹²

12. capable therefore of hybrid acts or "utterances" (speaking, making, doing, creating) incarnate in the *materiae* of any part of physical nature

As noted at the opening --with the definition of the artwork-- the things humans create share the human ontology and vice-versa. Margolis calls all such artifacts "utterances". The paradigm here, of course, is speech which is literally uttered, like the song of any bird. What is naturally "miraculous" about speech is that we hear it spontaneously as meaningful. We do not first hear sounds which we then decode. In a similar way, we see paintings, hear music, view sculpture, appreciate temples, imagine Dickens written **world**, feel sad at the dancing, dying swan, anger when Sam Spade is

¹² Mozart said of the English that they do not like music, they only like "the noise it makes".

betrayed (again). This is the real, the cultural world. It is uttered by humans and only makes sense to them.¹³

In all art appreciation cases, it is possible to divide, by abstraction, each experience into a purely physical and a purely semiotic element, to divide body from spirit. This division *ex post facto*, however, should not be confused with what we “really” see or what is “really” there. We are dealing with immediate experience –with “phenomenological experiences”, with *Erscheinungen*, in Hegel’s term (the salient, what shines forth, what sticks out)-- and this is an experience already intertwining the imaginative and the cultural. That is, even our spontaneous perceptions are culturally loaded and linguistically biased.

13. self-transforming or internally *gebildet* through its second-natured powers

The phrase “our second-natured powers”, as we have seen, refers primarily to our internalizing the ambient culture and, more specifically, internalizing a mother tongue. Once we have language, we then have access to an inner world, an interior and ever-expanding sphere where a budding sense of self flourishes. It is here that the trickiest parts of the human come to the fore --the parts most difficult to analyze because people do truly create so much more than any input they may receive might sum up to. The imagination, imaginative perception and memory now become **intensional** realities. The individual, languaged, can now develop skills, dreams, and thought-experiments in an efflorescent superabundance, aided by countless messages, symbols, codes, conversations, significances --bombarding her from the outside world --which are captured up, each second of each day.¹⁴

This growing individual –via internal self-construction—may now create the completely new and that which is not simply a re-ordering of the cultural elements or the elements of the various cultures she internalizes. This growth of the new –effected by individuals-- is what defeats any efforts at a reductive account of the human being. A person simply cannot be reduced to her ingredient parts or to any single factor thereof --be that factor genetic, atomic, cellular, or whatnot, whatever. There are doubtless limits to this creativity –dependent upon the internally *gebildet*, as the next section makes clear-- but these limits can never be envisaged nor defined beforehand.

14. empowered and constrained by the collective history it shares with similarly emergent creatures

Born into a specific society at a specific time, we find a world already in place -- a human, cultural world. This is our given. It is what Hegel called the *sittlich*, what Foucault terms the “historical *a priori*”, what Wittgenstein refers to as a “form of life”

¹³ This list of examples is meant to suggest all the arts. There may well be new art-forms “in the womb of time yet to be delivered”, of course. If some future artist gets “irritated” enough (in Pierce’s sense) with the seven arts we currently have. The important thing to notice is the adequation between the imaginatively-freighted perception of perceiver and perceived. We bring meanings to the artworks and they reciprocally send meanings out to us.

¹⁴ The very best work on the “dialogic imagination” is M. M. Bakhtin’s work bearing that title, though we should not forget Plato’s “dialogue between Self and Soul” nor C.S. Pierce’s “Tu-ism”. The formation of the self is coextensive with the formation of the Other. The private is always open to public criteria. Were this not so, there could be no possible pretence to Objectivity anywhere. The “intensional” is the “non-extended”, the opposite of the extentional, or that which can be weighed and measured, the *res extensa* of Descartes.

(*Lebensform*), what Nietzsche inveighed against, in vain, as the “herd morality”. The stage of history upon which this particular society plays constrains the part any one of us might assume from the very outset of our existence. The historical state of the native tongue we incorporate, the historical development of the tools and technology we find to hand --the political, social, ethical norms weighing upon our group at that time-- all serve to hedge in our possible thoughts, feelings and imaginations.¹⁵

Still, this collective history --which has made and fashioned the individual’s powers and skills-- is also what gives each individual the possible powers and skills to go beyond any such collective history.¹⁶

15 capable, thus, of functioning as a self, a person, a subject, an agent, within an aggregate of similarly formed selves, that is, free and responsible, capable of causally effective (incarnate) initiatives, capable of self-reference, of reporting its inner thoughts and experience in a public way, of understanding the utterances and acts of similarly endowed selves

Now that a person has emerged into the public arena --after having been built up by external forces, such as being reared in the family, groomed by adults, “kicking about” with playmates, and (rather a long stretch behind) after having received formal education **and** after having been built up by the internal growth which language acquisition or lingual skills have made possible-- she is a free agent and can be henceforth held responsible for her words and deeds. She can affect others, their emotions, thoughts and acts. She can speak and make known her inner life, desires and suggestions. She can spontaneously understand the words and actions of others. She can reflect upon her own beliefs, behaviour and talk, self-critically.

A special word might be said about the terms “aggregate” and “free” since they are both open to misunderstanding and abuse. An “aggregate” is just any group or collection of people. These people may have no relation even to our home culture or life-form. We perform as selves even among disparate gatherings of strangers or foreigners, people who may not share our prejudices, our ideologies, our language, people, in short, who share nothing with us except, *ex hypothesis*, our 1-17 human attributes here outlined.¹⁷ We seem to instinctively recognize other humans, as it were, **unless** we are rigidly programmed by our home society not to --this point is dwelt upon by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1975).

As for the fact that we are “free”, it might here be pointed out that, Margolis --in *Historied Thought, Constructed World*-- defines being “free” as the human capacity to

¹⁵ The importance of “positioning”, “situating” cannot be overstressed. The niche we occupy is a very animal, Darwinian-type of thing --“Geography is Fate”, as Heraclitus put it. Intra-societal situating is as potent here as any inter-society positioning. Of course, we are more than “hedged in” (we are often maimed or imprisoned) by such things as class, income, race, gender, in most modern societies. In fact, it is often the case that individuals from another class appear as almost a different species of animal from us.

¹⁶ Essential powers are such things as language, imagination, imaginatively-loaded perception, memory. Essential skills --very much obliged to the type of society we must situate ourselves in- may include: plane-piloting, telephone-using, car driving, guitar playing, whistling (for Lauren Bacall and Bogart, or the Gomerans of the Canary Islands), knot-tying (in honour of R.G. Collingwood), stilt-walking, card-shuffling, and the like.

¹⁷ An “aggregate” is often contrasted with a “community”, following Tönnies’ “*gesellschaft*” and “*gemeinschaft*” distinction. As for the “life-form” (*Lebensform*) of Wittgenstein, some hold there is only one such form valid for all mankind. It is employed here, however, to mean something like “home culture” or “tradition”, with all the fuzziness such terms are heir to --being German or being Chinese, for instance.

assent to or to deny a proposition. When we consider carefully all that that entails, we see just how momentous such a “being-free” truly is. We also realize its near-undeniability, we do indeed have such a freedom. Take, for instance, some group which insists “we hold these truths to be self-evident”, and a little voice in the crowd saying, “Well, I don’t”. Such a scenario is possible hence the freedom of agents seems a highly reasonable assumption.¹⁸

16. inherently interpretable and subject to change by being interpreted

Given the emphasis placed upon the reality and sheer effectiveness of the semiotic, the symbolic, the non-extensional and the meaningful in the make-up of the human being, it is hardly surprising that interpretation is a key factor in human life. Each of us is open to various interpretations –often virulently conflicting interpretations- - by our *confrères* whom we, in our turn, attempt to interpret or simply, spontaneously, do interpret. This is why biography and autobiography are such popular genres. Each would like to grasp, to find, to reveal the essence of the other –or of themselves. Unfortunately, we are all rather like Moby Dick –just another layer below that last penetrated layer, *ad infinitum*-- and represent different things to different interpreters. There simply is no stopping point to interpretation.

Further, the historicized way of “human being” makes the interpretive task all the more slippery as, little by little, the ambient culture which guaranteed the historical actor’s reality slithers from the grip of present consciousness. Being “interpretable”, it is easy to appreciate how the judgement on a life is later subject to real change via reinterpretation. It is also then relatively simple to admit that reality must be a consensual reality in some way, an interpretational accord.

A prime --albeit extreme-- case of such real changes effected through interpretation might be admirably illustrated by the standing afforded the tin-pot “god-man” of yesteryear –the Pol Pots, Hitlers, Stalins, Mussolinis, Maos. How were they seen by their followers? How are they viewed now? On a smaller scale, how is it possible for any of us to have enemies when we are all such nice people? Obviously, someone --or a whole host of poor critics-- somewhere --or globally-- must simply be interpreting us wrongly.¹⁹

¹⁸We might also recall, in this connection, *The Life of Brian*. When the crowd gathered below Brian all repeat “we are all individuals”, one individual has the courage to state, “I’m not”. One is also reminded of Bartleby and his “I would prefer not to”. As Dr. Johnson had it: “We know we are free and there is an end on it”.

¹⁹ The nature of physical entities –lacking the cultural dimension, the Intentionality (the intentional and the intensional complications) of humans-- is so much easier to interpret and easier to enforce consensus on. That is why science is more relied upon than the “human sciences”. And, scientists, being human, know just how tricky a type of creature they and their fellow creatures are. They hope to play it safe.

Forcing consensus on humans has been the very warp and woof of history. Any type of proselytism –religious or secular-- is a disguised method of getting others to admit just how right we obviously are. Were our being right so obvious, others would presumably --some time-- find it out for themselves.

17. not a natural kind entity but a history, or an entity that has a history rather than a nature, or a nature that is no more than a history –a history determinable but not determinate

“Not a natural kind entity” certainly does not mean that human beings are not animals. It does mean, however, that the kind of animal they are is not like a lion or a hedgehog, animals who are today the same as they were 1,000 or 3,000 years ago, animals whose behaviour is, generally, predictable and whose lives tend to reduplicate the lives of their progenitors. This is not the case with people. 1,000 years ago and we are with the Viking Hordes, 3,000 and we are with only-experts-know-what sort of “crazed creatures” and odd beliefs and consensual truths as to the universe and all that pertains unto it.

Rather neatly going back to the opening attributes of our tally (1-3), we see how each individual is a life-history, also how though people make things –Aristotle’s *poiesis*-- the way in which they make them –their tools, their beliefs, their cultural world- - itself goes on to make new kinds of people, and so on, each new generation slightly (or radically) altering the *praxis* of the generation before, reinterpreting it, further technologically fashioning the earlier way of life. Parents –each a separate life-history, an individual-- create their offspring and these offspring develop in the “social uterus” to become fully real only as historical phenomena in a new historical situation --differing usually quite markedly from the cultural world their parents inhabited.²⁰

To hold ourselves together, so to say, “from the cradle to the grave”, we narratize our lives in the same way as historians must narratize the past of groups, nations, or civilizations. We learn how to do this as we internalize our “better self”, the one we argue and debate with, whenever we think. We master the art of narrative -- when we do-- via the stories we hear in infancy.

Margolis emphasizes --and rings changes upon-- the historicist theme here for many reasons. Principal among them are: 1) it is a theme fatal to all scientisms and one which they ignore and would gladly eradicate were that possible; 2) once accepted, the theme renders “Objectivity” with a capital “O” untenable; 3) the historicist makes all appeals to “human nature” and what is “natural” seem a hardly sustainable form of argument; 4) it is a new theme and not found in the human annals much before the late eighteenth century, with Vico and Hegel; 5) once admitted, historicism puts an end to all transcendentalisms and teleologies, an end to essentialism, universalist pretensions, to dualism, to reductionisms of all stripes.

That the history which is a person is “determinable” but not “determinate” is the same as saying that we are interpretable but not determinate, our personal history becomes a matter of interpretation. Interpretations can hardly be “true” or “false”, but are rather “convincing”, “unconvincing”, “adequate”, “fair”, “unjust”, “off-the-wall”, and the like. In short, judgements on humans selves must take a relativist turn and the way must be kept open for incommensurabilisms. Relativism and incommensurabilism infecting our very way of “being-in-the-world” are, then, more than likely to also infect anything and everything we think about the world. This is not good news for many.

Margolis does not maintain that there is no “human nature” *tout court*. Human nature is defined by such adjectives and phrases as the 17 attributes above discussed, for instance. All humans, we might claim, are “like this”. It is simply that the “like this” is far from simple, its implications somewhat dizzying. “Like this” means we are immensely open-ended, slippery to grasp, variable, “fluxive”, plastic, the endless subjects and objects of our own fascinations. The lesson to draw might well be that

²⁰The theme, of course, is Marx’s. In a bluff oversimplification –which he knew to be such-- he remarked famously that “the handloom gave us the feudal baron, the steam engine, the industrial capitalist”.

having such a “nature” and sharing it with others, we should perhaps treat them –and even ourselves-- in a more kindly fashion. We might do well to keep our cognitive claims more modest, more flexible, more guarded. We should really even consider being a little more gentle with our almost-incredibly complicated fellows.

If anyone does not agree that the ontology embarked upon above is a fair one, it behoves him or her to point out its weaknesses and to float a more convincing replacement. If we do agree, however, with its general tenor, a few questions are now likely to appear pressing --given such an ontology as a background to our speculations. Below, some are listed, in no particular order of importance:-

1. Is a creature thus constituted likely to have access to “the Truth” –meaning by that term some transcendental, universal, invariant, always-true Truth about the meaning of life, the universe, and such?
2. In what way, if at all, can our various conflicting beliefs and opinions --grounded first in our *sittlich* backgrounds-- be legitimated, let alone made compatible?
3. How are our “hard” sciences to be legitimated?
4. How can our political systems and forms of authority be justified?
5. How, indeed, can the authority –or the power-- of any one human being over another be justified?
6. How can a particular distribution of scarce and necessary resources be justified?
7. How can the way certain humans treat the planet --and beyond-- be justified?

Legitimation –some genuinely convincing justification-- fair looms on the horizon of all and each one of our future endeavours since we seem to be at the mercy of a creature so storm-tossed by prejudice, bias, ignorance, rhetoric, fashion, interpretation, history and chance that whatever such a creature does (what we do) cries out for some answer to the human child’s insistent question “why?”

Margolis has offered answers to the all of the above questions in many a work, but I shall stop here.