

## § 9 Anthropological Machine

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{Haeckel's speechless, earliest-born man...}

—Hans Vaihinger

In 1899 Ernst Haeckel, professor at the University of Jena, published with Kröner of Stuttgart *Die Welträtsel*, "The Enigmas of the World," which intended, against every dualism and every metaphysics, to reconcile the philosophical pursuit of truth with the advances of the natural sciences. Despite the technicality and breadth of the problems it dealt with, in a few years over 150,000 copies of the book were in print, and it became a sort of gospel of scientific progressivism. The title contains more than an ironic allusion to the lecture given by Emil Du Bois-Reymond a few years earlier at the Academy of Sciences in Berlin, in which the renowned scientist had listed seven "enigmas of the world," declaring three of them "transcendental and unsolvable," three solvable (though not yet solved), and one uncertain. In the fifth chapter of his book, Haeckel, who believes he has cleared away the first three enigmas with his own doctrine of substance, concentrates on that "problem of problems" that is the origin of man, and that in some ways encompasses Du Bois-Reymond's three solvable, though not yet solved, problems. And here too he believes he has definitively resolved the question by means of a radical and coherent application of Darwinian evolutionism.

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cult task of reconstructing the evolutionary history of man on the basis of both the results of comparative anatomy and the findings of paleontological research. To this task Haeckel had already, in 1874, dedicated his *Anthropogenie*, in which he reconstructed the history of man from the fish of the Silurian up through the man-apes, or Anthropomorphs, of the Miocene. But his specific contribution—of which he was rightly proud—is to have hypothesized as a form of passage from the anthropoid apes (or man-apes) to man a peculiar being that he called “ape-man” (*Affenmensch*) or, since it was without language, *Pithecanthropus alalus*.

From the Placentals in the earliest Tertiary period (the Eocene) arise the first ancestors of the primates, the semi-apes, from which, in the Miocene, develop the true apes, and more precisely, from the Catarrhines, first come the dog-apes (the Cynopithecii) and then the man-apes (the Anthropomorphs); from one branch of the latter, during the Pliocene period, arises the ape-man without speech (the *Pithecanthropus alalus*), and from him, finally, speaking man.<sup>2</sup>

The existence of this pithecanthropus or ape-man, which in 1874 was merely a hypothesis, became a reality when in 1891 a Dutch military doctor, Eugen Dubois, discovered on the island of Java a piece of skull and a femur similar to those of present-day man, and, to Haeckel's great satisfaction (Dubois was an enthusiastic reader of Haeckel) baptized the being to whom they had belonged *Pithecanthropus erectus*. This, Haeckel peremptorily affirmed, “is in truth the much-sought ‘missing link,’ supposed to be wanting in the evolutionary chain of the primates, which stretches unbroken from the lowest Catarrhines to the highest-developed man.”<sup>3</sup>

The idea of this *sprachloser Urmensch*—as Haeckel also defines him—entailed, however, some aporias of which he does not seem to have been aware. In reality, the passage from animal to man, despite the emphasis placed on comparative anatomy and paleontological findings, was produced by subtracting an element that had nothing to do with either one, and that instead was presupposed as the identifying characteristic of the human: language. In

identifying himself with language, the speaking man places his own muteness outside of himself, as already and not yet human.

It fell to a linguist, Heymann Steinthal—who was also one of the last representatives of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which had sought to apply the methods of modern science to the study of Judaism—to lay bare the aporias implicit in Haeckel's theory of the *Homo alalus* and, more generally, those of what we can call the modern anthropological machine. In his studies on the origin of language, Steinthal had himself advanced, many years before Haeckel, the idea of a prelinguistic stage of humanity. He had tried to imagine a phase of man's perceptual life in which language has not yet appeared, and he had compared this with the perceptual life of the animal; he then tried to show how language could spring from the perceptual life of man and not from that of the animal. But this is precisely where an aporia appeared which he would only fully realize some years later.

We have [he writes] compared this purely hypothetical stage of the human soul with that of the animal, and have in the first discerned, in general and in all respects, an excess of forces. We then had the human soul apply this excess to the formation of language. We have thereby been able to show why language originated from the human soul and its perceptions, and not from that of the animal. . . . But in our description of animal and human souls we have had to leave aside language, the possibility of which we were precisely supposed to prove. It first should have been shown whence stems the force by means of which the soul forms language; this force which has the ability to create language obviously cannot stem from language. For this reason we have invented a stage of man that precedes language. But of course, this is only a fiction; for language is so necessary and natural for the human being, that without it man can neither truly exist nor be thought of as existing. Either man has language, or he simply is not. On the other hand—and this justifies the fiction—language nevertheless cannot be regarded as already inherent in the human soul; rather, it is by this time a production of man, even if not yet a fully conscious one. It is a stage of the soul's development and requires a deduction from the preceding stages. With it, true and proper human activity begins; it is the bridge that leads from the ani-

mal kingdom to the human kingdom. . . . But why the human soul alone builds this bridge, why man alone and not the animal progresses through language from animality to humanity: this is what we wanted to explain through a comparison of the animal with the animal-man. This comparison shows us that man, as we must imagine him, that is, without language, is indeed an animal-man [*Tier-Mensch*] and not a human animal-*[Menschentier]*, and is always already a species of man and not a species of animal.<sup>4</sup>

What distinguishes man from animal is language, but this is not a natural given already inherent in the psychophysical structure of man; it is, rather, a historical production which, as such, can be properly assigned neither to man nor to animal. If this element is taken away, the difference between man and animal vanishes, unless we imagine a nonspeaking man—*Homo alalus*, precisely—who would function as a bridge that passes from the animal to the human. But all evidence suggests that this is only a shadow cast by language, a presupposition of speaking man, by which we always obtain only an animalization of man (an animal-man, like Haeckel's ape-man) or a humanization of the animal (a man-ape). The animal-man and the man-animal are the two sides of a single fracture, which cannot be mended from either side.

Returning to his theory some years later, after having learned of Darwin's and Haeckel's theses, which by then were at the center of scientific and philosophical debates, Steinthal is perfectly well aware of the contradiction implicit in his hypothesis. What he had tried to understand was why man alone and not the animal creates language; but that was tantamount to understanding how man originates from animal. And this is precisely where the contradiction arises:

The prelinguistic stage of intuition can only be one, not double, and it cannot be different for animal and for man. If it were different, that is, if man were naturally higher than the animal, then the origin of man would not coincide with the origin of language, but rather with the origin of his higher form of intuition out of the lower form which is the animal's. Without realizing it, I presupposed this origin: in reality, man with his human characteristics was given to me through cre-

ation, and I then sought to discover the origin of language in man. But in this way, I contradicted my presupposition: that is, that the origin of language and the origin of man were one and the same; I set man up first and then had him produce language.<sup>5</sup>

The contradiction that Steinthal detects here is the same one that defines the anthropological machine which—in its two variants, ancient and modern—is at work in our culture. Insofar as the production of man through the opposition man/animal, human/inhuman, is at stake here, the machine necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also always already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already an exclusion). Indeed, precisely because the human is already presupposed every time, the machine actually produces a kind of state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy in which the outside is nothing but the exclusion of an inside and the inside is in turn only the inclusion of an outside.

On the one hand, we have the anthropological machine of the moderns. As we have seen, it functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human: *Homo alalus*, or the ape-man. And it is enough to move our field of research ahead a few decades, and instead of this innocuous paleontological find we will have the Jew, that is, the non-man produced within the man, or the *néomort* and the overcomatose person, that is, the animal separated within the human body itself.

The machine of earlier times works in an exactly symmetrical way. If, in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalizing the human, here the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and the non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* or *Homo ferus*, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form.

Both machines are able to function only by establishing a zone of indifference at their centers, within which—like a “missing link” which is always lacking because it is already virtually pres-

ent—the articulation between human and animal, man and non-man, speaking being and living being, must take place. Like every space of exception, this zone is, in truth, perfectly empty, and the truly human being who should occur there is only the place of a ceaselessly updated decision in which the caesurae and their rearticulation are always dislocated and displaced anew. What would thus be obtained, however, is neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a *bare life*.

And faced with this extreme figure of the human and the inhuman, it is not so much a matter of asking which of the two machines (or of the two variants of the same machine) is better or more effective—or, rather, less lethal and bloody—as it is of understanding how they work so that we might, eventually, be able to stop them.

## § 10 *Umwelt*

No animal can enter into relation with an object as such.

—Jakob von Uexküll

It is fortunate that the baron Jakob von Uexküll, today considered one of the greatest zoologists of the twentieth century and among the founders of ecology, was ruined by the First World War. To be sure, even before that, as an independent researcher first in Heidelberg and then at the Zoological Station in Naples, he had earned himself a fairly good scientific reputation for his studies of the physiology and nervous system of invertebrates. But once left without his familial inheritance, he was forced to abandon the southern sun (though he kept a villa on Capri, where he would die in 1944, and where Walter Benjamin would stay for several months in 1924) and integrate himself into the University of Hamburg, founding there the Institut für Umweltforschung, which would make him famous.

Uexküll's investigations into the animal environment are contemporary with both quantum physics and the artistic avant-gardes. And like them, they express the unreserved abandonment of every anthropocentric perspective in the life sciences and the radical dehumanization of the image of nature (and so it should come as no surprise that they strongly influenced both Heidegger, the philosopher of the twentieth century who more than any other strove to separate man from the living being, and Gilles Deleuze, who sought to think the animal in an absolutely nonanthropo-

## § 16 Animalization

Men are animals, some of whom raise their own kind.

—Peter Sloterdijk

Heidegger was perhaps the last philosopher to believe in good faith that the place of the *polis* (the *polos* {pole} where the conflict between concealedness and unconcealedness, between the *animalitas* and the *humanitas* of man, reigns) was still practicable, and that it was still possible for men, for a people—holding themselves in that risky place—to find their own proper historical destiny. He was, that is, the last to believe (at least up to a certain point, and not without doubts and contradictions) that the anthropological machine, which each time decides upon and recomposes the conflict between man and animal, between the open and the not-open, could still produce history and destiny for a people. It is likely that at a certain point he realized his error, and understood that a decision that responded to a historical mission of being was nowhere possible. Already in 1934–35, in the course on Hölderlin in which he attempts to reawaken the “fundamental emotional tonality of Dasein’s historicity,” he writes that “the possibility of a great disruption [*Erschütterung*, the same term that describes the animal’s being exposed in something undisconcealed] of historical existence of a people has disappeared. Temples, images, and customs are no longer capable of taking on the historical vocation of a people in order to compel it in a new task.”<sup>1</sup> By this point, post-history was beginning to knock on the doors of a concluded metaphysics.

Today, at a distance of nearly seventy years, it is clear for anyone who is not in absolutely bad faith that there are no longer historical tasks that can be taken on by, or even simply assigned to, men. It was in some ways already evident starting with the end of the First World War that the European nation-states were no longer capable of taking on historical tasks and that peoples themselves were bound to disappear. We completely misunderstand the nature of the great totalitarian experiments of the twentieth century if we see them only as a carrying out of the nineteenth-century nation-states' last great tasks: nationalism and imperialism. The stakes are now different and much higher, for it is a question of taking on as a task the very factual existence of peoples, that is, in the last analysis, their bare life. Seen in this light, the totalitarisms of the twentieth century truly constitute the other face of the Hegelo-Kojevian idea of the end of history: man has now reached his historical telos and, for a humanity that has become animal again, there is nothing left but the depoliticization of human societies by means of the unconditioned unfolding of the oikonomia, or the taking on of biological life itself as the supreme political (or rather impolitical) task.

It is likely that the times in which we live have not emerged from this aporia. Do we not see around and among us men and peoples who no longer have any essence or identity—who are delivered over, so to speak, to their inessentiality and their inactivity (*inoperosità*)—and who grope everywhere, and at the cost of gross falsifications, for an inheritance and a task, *an inheritance as task*? Even the pure and simple relinquishment of all historical tasks (reduced to simple functions of internal or international policing) in the name of the triumph of the economy, often today takes on an emphasis in which natural life itself and its well-being seem to appear as humanity's last historical task—if indeed it makes sense here to speak of a "task."

The traditional historical potentialities—poetry, religion, philosophy—which from both the Hegelo-Kojevian and Heideggerian perspectives kept the historico-political destiny of peoples awake, have long since been transformed into cultural spectacles

and private experiences, and have lost all historical efficacy. Faced with this eclipse, the only task that still seems to retain some seriousness is the assumption of the burden—and the "total management"—of biological life, that is, of the very animality of man. Genome, global economy, and humanitarian ideology are the three united faces of this process in which posthistorical humanity seems to take on its own physiology as its last, impolitical mandate.

It is not easy to say whether the humanity that has taken upon itself the mandate of the total management of its own animality is still human, in the sense of that *humanitas* which the anthropological machine produced by de-ciding every time between man and animal; nor is it clear whether the well-being of a life that can no longer be recognized as either human or animal can be felt as fulfilling. To be sure, such a humanity, from Heidegger's perspective, no longer has the form of keeping itself open to the undisclosed of the animal, but seeks rather to open and secure the not-open in every domain, and thus closes itself to its own openness, forgets its humanitas, and makes being its specific disinhibitor. The total humanization of the animal coincides with a total animalization of man.