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**The Volume of Being:
Reflections on an Anthropological Science**

Albert Piette

University of Paris West Nanterre

Centre for Ethnology and Comparative Sociology

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At the very end of *The Order of Things*, Foucault writes that man, being a “recent invention”, became a problem for human knowledge less than two centuries ago (Foucault 2001: 422). He adds that man is already starting to fade. On the subject of the human sciences, he points out that in any case, “not only are they able to do without the concept of man, they are also unable to pass through it, for they always address themselves to that which constitutes its outer limits” (*ibid.*: 413). “I believe the ultimate goal of the human sciences to be not to constitute, but to dissolve man,” wrote Lévi-Strauss (1968: 247), who searched for unconscious cognitive structures, as we know: “Structuralism reintegrates man into nature, while making it possible to disregard the subject—that unbearably spoilt child who has occupied the philosophical scene for too long now” (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 687). In this regard, we should not try to oppose the structural sciences and those of experience. Structuralism and phenomenology are the same in one respect: neither of them tackles the empirical unity that each human constitutes. Heidegger’s contempt for concrete man and for anthropology is well-known. Anthropology presented “a possible catchment area”, to which he preferred the abstraction of Dasein and the existential analytic (Heidegger 1997: 149). As for Husserl’s phenomenology, Hans Blumenberg dedicated many pages to criticising his “anthropological prohibition”, which sees “man falling, so to speak, outside of any systematic framework, or if you prefer: he passes through it” (Blumenberg 2011: 44). Then where is man able to exist? Blumenberg explained: “Husserl’s decision against anthropology is not an arbitrary or light-minded misanthropic act against the humanity of what is expected from philosophy”. Husserl saw anthropology as a “philosophical underestimation” and believed that “philosophy as phenomenology could do more. It must be able to provide a theory of every possible type of consciousness and reason, of object and world, as well as of intersubjectivity” (*ibid.*: 46). Will this not lead much of phenomenology to set its sights too directly on “essences” based on examples divorced from contingent details and concrete situations? Husserl has a tendency to purify his examples according to a procedure that is not empirical but “eidetic”, favouring intuitive data, even admitting imagined cases, with the goal of ridding experiential examples of their vagueness, impurity or factual contingencies.

To those who would, outside of these debates, raise the objection that the human sciences in general and anthropology in particular look directly at humans, I would answer that they do indeed look at them, but they are steeped in three decisive restrictions. First, they are restricted by homogenising operations—often very early in the social science research process—whereby humans are described and analysed as sharing a set of sociocultural traits¹. This is a way of working on human beings without them, without each of them, in favour of a social and cultural entity that does not exist. The second restriction is the reduction of humans to a few skills (interactional, cognitive, psychological), which are themselves able to be homogenised among all members or actors of the entity that is supposed to be described and detailed: an activity, an action, an event. Each of them, absorbed along with the others, is linked to an “as”: not only *as* a member of a group, but also *as* he performs an action, *as* he goes through an experience, or *as* he is governed by a social or cognitive structure, or even *as* he uses one mental schema or another. Furthermore, depending on the approach, it can reach the point where the human himself is suspended and circumvented in favour of action, experience or relations that have become primary objects of intelligibility. Social and cultural

1 Malinowski is very clear on this subject, saying that his goal is to work on people not “*as* individuals” but “*as* members of a human community”. See Malinowski (1922: 23).

anthropology, like the social sciences, practices a kind of “social-cultural-cognitive-experiential-relational diversion” of humans—I would also add “nonhumanist”, to refer to the weight that has been given to nonhumans in recent years, and to highlight that it would be a shame if, after sociocultural groups, non-humans were once again to assert themselves as subjects favoured by anthropology to the detriment of human individuals. Placing humans in sets, placing them between parentheses in favour of other entities, fragmenting them, reducing them: the methods of de-anthropocentring anthropology are numerous, combining methodological arguments (stressing the various difficulties involved in keeping the focus on individuals from the beginning to the end of the research process), political arguments (the individual as an “ugly duckling” that causes great sociopolitical and environmental harm), or theoretical-ontological arguments (positing that actions, relations, the unconscious, society or nature are key, not individuals themselves). In any case, social and cultural forms play a too preponderant role: as an explicatory factor, as a descriptive aim or exploration site, alternating between these three types of role, without ever really abandoning the first one.

For 50, 60 years or more, researchers in the human sciences have been keeping up this type of epistemology, which has been fraught with consequences. To a certain extent, it is reminiscent of an observation made by Foucault, who said that his generation’s “horizon of reflection” had been defined by Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and that this horizon “toppled” around the years 1950-55 (Foucault 1996: 55). Only to some extent. In my view, he belongs to a generation that accepted the theoretical and methodological results of structuralism (in terms of structure and relations) and also of the social sciences (in terms of consciousness, action or intersubjectivity), these being two different ways of avoiding humans and existence as points of reference. In other words, the anthropological tradition considers the human being unimportant, and believes in working on nature, society, culture and social relations. Thus I imagine an ant specialist, a myrmecologist, turning attention away from ants in order to study sand or the humans who crush them.

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The extremely high level of individuation in humans is a major anthropological fact (and has been, not just for a few recent decades, but for tens of thousands of years of hominisation). Other living species do not possess it to such a high degree, to the level that defines consciousness of the self, awareness of existing as singular, regardless of any psychological, social or cultural slant that could be placed on that individuality. It is oxymoronic of anthropology as the science of human beings to homogenise these units socioculturally, since the characteristic feature of existence is that it is implacably private and singular.

As reflected in philosophy’s classic debates, an anthropology that sets out to be anthropo-focused – an individuology - cannot separate an action, connection or experience from the person who performs or experiences it². Nor should this anthropology forget Aristotle: “And so one might even raise the question whether the words 'to walk', 'to be healthy', 'to sit' imply that each of these things is existent, and similarly in any other case of this sort; for none of them is either self-subsistent or capable of being separated from substance, but rather, if anything, it is that which walks or sits or is healthy that is an existent

² See my book with empirical data and methodologico-theoretical debates (Piette 2015).

thing. Now these are seen to be more real because there is something definite which underlies them (i.e. the substance or individual), which is implied in such a predicate; for we never use the word 'good' or 'sitting' without implying this" (Aristote 2004: 1028a). I cannot see the action of strolling or sitting without seeing the person who performs these actions. It is this unit, this volume of being, identifiable at least in its material unity, that is the subject of anthropology. Aristotle emphasises "substances", what we could call volumes of being, which are the primary constituents of the world: Socrates, Plato, a dog, etc. That which characterises them—their actions and relations—presupposes the existence of this volume of being.

What, then, is a volume of being? It arises from the meeting of a sperm and an ovum. This meeting produces an egg, a new cell, one that is unique, at least in terms of its genome. Having resulted from what may have started as an embrace, it is immediately more than the sum of the two: it is a unique volume of being. In utero, it develops and modifies itself from received genetic potential and according to the diverse information this volume of being integrates, first from the intra-uterine wall, then from the placenta. Before dividing, there is first a single, unique cell, which lives between twelve and twenty-four hours. This volume of being will then develop physiologically, neurologically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, culturally, from its first moments, and will thus continue its development, or what we could call its existence, until it dies.

Defining humans as relational beings seems to me to be a tautology, something obvious: it is a feature of all living organisms, including a germ cell that is not associated with a rigid genetic programme, and also has links with its micro-environment. Does this mean we must, like Jean-Jacques Kupiec, say that "the living organism comes into being relative to what it is not"? (Kupiec 2009: 209) In any case, we must not forget that "we are, each of us, bodies, i.e., embodied; each is this one and not that, each here and not there, each now and not then" (Cavell 1999: 369). The principle of anthropological science would be this: in all parts of the world, there are individuals—those ones, each one—which anyone can identify and designate as such. Anthropology would therefore be a de-linking and separation operation, an anthropo-analysis.

It is difficult to distinguish a substratum from its attributes. Let us stay with this volume of being, a concrete being connected with various characteristics, the continuation of the germ cell, with its surface and everything it contains. I do not associate this volume of being with that which exists by itself, with autonomy, nor with a permanent substratum. But it seems to me that Lalande's definition is not inadequate for characterising a human volume of being: "that which is modified by change while remaining the same" (Lalande 2006: 1048). Francisco Varela himself noted the following: "Unity (the fact of being distinguishable from one's environment and therefore from other unities) is the sole condition necessary for the existence of a studied field", unity remains "a unity... independently of the transformations it may undergo" (Varela 1979: 61-62). The volume of being enables us to draw attention to the fact that properties and qualities—which play different roles in the formation of the empirical unit—as well as accidents, arise, settle and change, but they never completely change this unit. Varela also examines unity with its inner transformations, stressing that coupling points are only part of the whole (*ibid.*: 191). In that case, it is the coherence of "unity" that is observed, subordinate to its conservation in particular.

A volume of being is of course matter: bones, muscles, neurones, cells, blood and water, which would be of interest to a biologist. If a researcher gives attention to these elements and derives principles of causality from this or that action or experience, he is doing chemistry, biology or cognitive science. The anthropologist connects this volume to an existent individual who lives and continues living. Time lies at the heart of existence. It is what places humans, other beings or objects in the succession of present moments. It generates new moments, and makes sure that the future becomes the present, and soon the past. No one can escape time. No one can be present in any moment other than the one in which he finds himself at moment *t*. This gives a strong impact to Simone Weil's words, "What counts in a human life are not the events that dominate the course of its years—or even months, or even days. It is the way one minute links with the next, and what this costs each person in her body, in her heart, in her soul, to carry out this linking minute by minute" (Weil 2002: 186-187), and to the specific task of describing the humans directly concerned by this succession of moments. All the living beings are "in the world". Only human beings are "in the time", knowing this succession and their death. Hence it is very important to follow and observe in the details the continuity of one individual, at a time, in this succession of situations. This detailed observation, I have called "phenomenography".

Each individual is a unit, an identity, connected with an identifiable corporeal and mental continuity. He has his singularity, composed of infinite characteristics (which would be impossible to add up), and also containing permanent elements, genes, and relatively stable elements like physiological traits, social dispositions or psychological tendencies that gradually result from years of life. There are also circumstantial details, unimportant gestures, like words spoken here and now. Beyond these elements, which are of course constitutive of the individual, observed concrete reality teaches us not to exclude ever-abundant "accidents" and not to get hung up on that which is shared with others, or relevant in one activity, or stable in a continuity. It is at this level of detailing that I posit a singularity that cannot be interpreted in terms of relations and trajectories. Faced with the plethora of details, it is of course impossible to link every gesture to a past or future movement, to an inclination or disposition. But most importantly, it is the infinity of details in gestures, facial expressions and thoughts that makes it possible to recognise the individual as a force of singularity. Details—like an infinite surplus to be captured, like a margin that never decreases—cannot be reproduced by adding up or amalgamating past or present relations, networks, association lines or social trajectories. Details are like the ultimate sign of the being's independence with respect to the causes and relations that preceded it.

Paul Cézanne took care to "in-complete" his paintings by taking details away from them, as witnessed by those who regularly visited the painter's studio and saw his paintings being made (Thevoz 2003: 21). Phenomenography takes an opposite approach. It will always try to add details, in order to give nuances to descriptions, to modalise these and attempt in this way to get to the bottom of the subject. The notion of leftovers might be preferable to that of details, designating not just what many branches of ethnography do not retain, but also designating the observed people themselves. It is these leftovers, usually withdrawn, that anthropology should not relinquish. Anthropology is a "leftoverography". Leftovers are also useful for criticising existing theories, displacing paradigms or encouraging the creation of a new discipline. Let us not forget Leonardo da Vinci: "It is a very great fault in a painter to

repeat the same motions in figures, and the same folds in draperies in the same composition, as also to make all the faces alike”(Vinci 2004: 48)

Writing about Pessoa, Tabucchi said something about the phenomenographic spirit: “Avoiding the affirmative sign, repudiating *prevalence*. Because he understood that in every *yes*, even the fullest and most well-rounded, there is a tiny *no*, a corpuscule that bears the opposite sign.” (Tabucchi 2012: 31-32). Much of anthropological science should play out in this kind of descriptive subtlety. Anthropology-reality, one might say! It observes, describes and analyses someone in the process of existing. This leads us away from phenomenology, which analyses experiences instead of existences that continue, searching them for purified characteristics rather than the detailed complexity of presences. Nor is it sociology or pragmatic anthropology, which focuses on activities and actions. And this also presupposes not accepting the descriptive results of cognitive anthropology, which would not enable a filmmaker to provide an actor with a cognitive description and then expect the actor to produce the “real” person. It presupposes a truncated anthropology of human beings as informers, receivers, transmitters (it is not the human that exists), one that pays little attention to the different strata within a volume of being.

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