

# The Problem of the Nature of Man in the Works of P. Weiss

## 1. Preliminary remarks

Paul Weiss (1901 – 2002) has first become known to the scientific world in connection with the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*; he assisted his colleague C. Hartshorne in editing the unpublished works of the great American pragmatist thinker of an elder generation. M. R. Cohen and A. N. Whitehead were the most important among his teachers, but soon in his development he left the moderns behind and became a believer of a sort of Aristotelian substance philosophy.

Weiss had a remarkable biography in that he was the son of a Hungarian coppersmith and his German wife Emma whose maiden name was Rothschild; they had immigrated in the USA in the nineties and had then settled in the Lower East Side of New York. No one could have guessed that Weiss, starting from small beginnings, was to have a long and steady career as one of the most remarkable 20<sup>th</sup> centuries' American philosophers. In his youth, he has visited several European universities and became acquainted with some of his main figures. He has held chairs on several American universities and has retired at an age of over ninety.

Weiss is one of the few thinkers of our time that have revived the project of ontology, so sharply criticized by Hume and Kant. After delivering a dissertation on the theory of systems, he wrote his first major book under the title *Reality* (1938), criticizing F. H. Bradley for his monism and A. N. Whitehead for his process view. Processes, so he argues, presuppose a stable frame that must be sustained by individual substances. Whereas the ontology of his first work was a naturalistic one, he has later on widened his view on philosophy in books such as *Modes of Being* (1958), *Beyond All Appearances* (1974), *Creative Ventures* (1992) and *Being and Other Realities* (1995).

In the late fifties, Weiss has begun to lay down his daily considerations in a diary under the title *Philosophy in Process* (1966 - ?). The eleven or twelve books that have been published in the meantime contain no information of personal interest as might be expected from a diary; rather, they bear witness of a continual process of revision of the foundations of Weiss's ontological systems. Their importance may be seen in the search for an "Ur-Philosophy", understood as an open system: Whereas ontology traditionally has been anxious to fixate the categorical relations of the world, Weiss moves into the opposite direction.

Weiss has tried to get rid of the humanistic restrictions that W. James and J. Dewey have imposed on Peirce's philosophy. The pragmatic maxim,<sup>1</sup> as understood by Peirce, was expected to supplement the Cartesian standards of *claritas* and *distinctio* by a third degree of clearness of apprehension. Now, a maxim in the sense of Kant has the connotation of a certain amount of subjective freedom, and so the pragmatic maxim entitles the thinker to model his thought-objects as open concepts, capable of transformation to some degree. The interrelated concepts of individual man, mankind, humanity and so forth are examples of its usage by Weiss.

## 2. Historic background

Weiss, in one of his early works, makes the observation, “[that] the problem of the nature of man is one of our most neglected problems.”<sup>2</sup> In preparing this essay, I have often wondered why Weiss is speaking consistently of the nature of man instead of speaking of human nature or so. The only possible answer to this question seems to be that Weiss, being afraid that an adjectival characterization of his problem is likely to give way to loose figures of speech, insists on the above substantival formulation.

Weiss organizes a dispute between ancient, medieval and modern thinkers, another *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, so to speak. Antiquity and the middle ages have hinted at a unitary conception of man. The stoics, e. g. Cicero, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius conceived of the idea of universal man. The Thomists believed in a divine creation and defended the position of the *connaturalitas*, the common nature of all men. Dante, on the edge of modernity, had the conception of a universal state. Their philosophies, however, are thoroughly impregnated by religious and theological premisses.

It has to be admitted, that there are strong unifying features in the systems of Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza, too.<sup>3</sup> Descartes is convinced of the unity of human reason and maintains the existence of an anthropocentric world-order. Hobbes' mechanistic materialism reduces all beings to a matter-in-motion ontology whereas Spinoza's pantheism absorbs them in an all-embracing substance. But in the main,

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear (1878)”, in: *Writings of C. S. Peirce*, Vol. III, ed. by C. J. W. Kloesel, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 266: “It appears, then, that the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” Vide also my short article, “C. S. Peirce: How to Make Our Ideas Clear”, in: Quante (ed.), *Kleines Werklexikon der Philosophie*, Stuttgart A. Kröner, 2012, pp. 443 – 446.

<sup>2</sup> P. Weiss, *Nature and Man*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947, p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> The transition from medieval philosophy to modernity is reflected by H. W. Carr in a thoughtful book under the title, *The Unique Status of Man*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928.

the modern age is the era of a triumphant dualism. Hobbes came to distinguish the natural state of man from the civic state, and later authors added a distinction of the citizen and economic man.

In consequence of this development, the moderns are inclined or even necessitated to abandon the unitary conception of man, the idea of universal man. For example, Diderot, in his *Encyclopédie*, makes the concession that there are by necessity many partial definitions of man. Moreover, the idea of humanity is separated from its conceptual basis. Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and their followers, in speaking of the approvability of human actions, give it an emotional twist. Through Rousseau, Hume, and Smith the new *leitmotif* of sympathy, connecting all nations and creeds, begins to spread soon over Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Weiss sets philosophy the task to restore the unitary conception of man, the idea of universal man, but also to free it from all religious and theological presuppositions. The first problem he has to meet is the problem of individuation. Today, this problem is often handed over to special sciences, e. g. to physics or to biology. But these sciences, in being merely special branches of human knowledge are not able to give a comprehensive answer to the question of how a being is individuated in the process of its becoming.

### 3. *The problem of individuation, or the genesis of the self*

The first thinker perhaps to grapple with the problem of individuation was Aristotle: Matter ("*materia*") for him was a coming-into-being, and the so-called prime matter ("*materia prima*"), reminiscent of Plato's "*chora*", was a realm of possibilities awaiting their realization. Every being is the result of a conjunction of form and matter, and the human being makes no exception. Aristotle has no trouble with the modern problem of the psycho-physical existence of man because the human soul is for him the first actuality or entelechy of the living organism.

St. Thomas Aquinas is of the opinion that God only shortly after conception implants an immortal soul into the new creature. Whereas Aristotle fails to appreciate the problem of individuation in its full intricacy, the solution of St. Thomas Aquinas is unacceptable for Weiss because it depends on the premise of a divine creation. From a logical point of view (to borrow a phrase from W. v. O. Quine) we must ask whether individuation can be brought about by a single *agens*, operating as the selfsame factor in every case. Obviously, this consideration must lead to a dilemma:

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<sup>4</sup> For this, *vide* A. O. Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1961.

*“Biology cannot tell us how or why each plant and animal is unduplicable, or how and why every inanimate object is distinct from every other; these questions are not open to experiment or answerable by observation. [...] A principle of individuation works uniformly in all cases and therefore fails to individuate, or it is itself individuated [...]. A general principle can not individuate it, and a supposed individual act begs the question.”<sup>5</sup>*

For Weiss, the process of individuation consists in the production of beings with a bodily existence and an accompanying privacy or substantial inwardness. Although a Neo-Aristotelian, Weiss from his beginnings has advocated the thesis that all beings, living or non-living, have a natural history.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the Aristotelian paradigm of individuation has to be combined with the undisputable facts of evolution. However, it is privacy or substantial inwardness that must be accounted for:

*“The new being depends for its presence on the conjoint activity of entities in the sperm and egg. But its privacy is unique, and must have a source distinct from those entities. One way of accounting for that privacy - and for any other - is by showing each to be a condensation of a primal, insistent continuum, primitive, unbounded, and indeterminate. Plato referred to this as the ‘receptable’; Aristotle called it a ‘prime matter’; Whitehead spoke of it as ‘creativity’.”<sup>7</sup>*

Only the spontaneous dissolution of the primal continuum into discrete parts can explain the unique constellation of bodily and non-bodily factors in the process of individuation. It cannot be accounted for in causal terms for causation presupposes a rule connecting antecedent events with succeeding events. But temporal succession and a spatial framework are likely to come into being after the process of individuation has been started. Moreover, *“radical origination”*, as Weiss calls it, joins the nature of an abstract possibility with the efficacy of a propensity. This is his proposal:

*“The Greek word for ‘power’ is dunamis. Dunamis is also Greek for ‘potentiality’ and for ‘dynamic’. The primal continuum is all three at once; ‘dunamis’ therefore is an ideal (...) name for it.”<sup>8</sup>*

Weiss’s theory has three essential advantages: Firstly, it maintains the possibility of a radical origination, i.e. an origination that is not given rise by a cause, divine or

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<sup>5</sup> P. Weiss, *Beyond All Appearances*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1974, p. 310.

<sup>6</sup> P. Weiss, *Modes of Being*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958, pp. 47 – 48. On the following pages, Weiss gives his systematic treatment of the nature of man.

<sup>7</sup> P. Weiss, *Privacy*, Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983, S. 20.

<sup>8</sup> P. Weiss, *ibid.*, p. 21.

otherwise. Radical origination is not caused at all; it is a spontaneous process of a self-dividing continuum. Secondly, it stipulates a co-origination of human body and human soul; neither is the body the predecessor of the soul nor is the soul the predecessor of the body. And thirdly, it corrects a Cartesian mistake in that it gives the body a share in the privacy or substantial inwardness that every being is supposed to have in it.<sup>9</sup>

Modern philosophy has introduced a new distinction into an old debate, namely, the distinction of material body, a particle moved by mechanical forces, from organic body or living matter. It favors, however, the hypothesis that the organic body is to be analyzed eventually into a functional complex of material or mechanical components. Weiss avoids this problem by differentiating between “*living body*” and “*lived body*”.<sup>10</sup> His theory does not aim at an ontological analysis of matter into ultimate components, but at a phenomenological elucidation of human bodily experiences.<sup>11</sup>

In accord with its origination from the primal continuum, the nucleus of the human individual, the matrix of his biographical self-realization, is a naked self or, in the words of the bible<sup>12</sup>, cited by the modern poet R. Lowell:

*Non est species (ei), neque decor [...]*

#### 4. *Man and mankind; the problem of humanity*

In speaking of the problem of the nature of man, the philosopher must take notice of an ambiguity. The concept of nature can be interpreted in several ways, e. g. in the Greek sense of the growing of living beings or in the modern sense of the sum total of events or processes that enfold themselves in space-time, determined by law. The transition from the ancient to the modern usage is one of the decisive processes in the rise of post-medieval philosophy.

The change can be traced back to the medieval controversy as to the status of universal concepts. The Realism of the Thomists maintained that these concepts have an objective status of their own whereas the nominalism of, say, Occam, insists on

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<sup>9</sup> P. Weiss, *Nature and Man*, pp. 109 – 114.

<sup>10</sup> P. Weiss, *Privacy*, pp. 3 / 4 and *ibid.*, pp. 13 / 14; *vide* also P. Weiss, *Beyond All Appearances*, pp. 347 – 350.

<sup>11</sup> In other words, the relationship between “*living body*” and “*lived body*” exemplifies the Hegelian “identity in difference”.

<sup>12</sup> R. Lowell, “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket”, from *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946), in: *Collected Poems*, ed. by F. Bidart and D. Gewanter, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, p. 17. (“*He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.*” [Isaiah 53:2])

the alleged fact that words can signify individual facts only; needless to say that most of the moderns, such as Hobbes or Leibniz, are prepared to follow nominalism. Now, in the footsteps of Duns Scotus, Weiss conceives of a “*nature*” as a universal concept that is “*embedded in an appearance*”.<sup>13</sup> In his diary, he makes an interesting confession:

*“The more I read in and about Duns Scotus, the more it seems that my view is closer to his than to that of any other thinker. But I must confess that I cannot get his views entirely clear, nor can I readily interpret what he says if I free myself from the traditional distinctions of which he makes use. What seems to be needed today is a strong Scotistic philosophy expressed in modern terms, dealing with problems now to the fore.”*<sup>14</sup>

The genial scot, a Franciscan monk, had developed in the late Middle Ages a highly original system of metaphysics: He defended the univocity of being against St. Thomas Aquinas but was opposed to the nominalism of William Occam, too. He tried to improve the Porphyrian tree by introducing a so-called individual difference that was to differentiate individual beings in themselves instead of differentiating genera and species only (“*haecceitas*”). Combining this metaphysical individualism with a moderate realistic semiotics and philosophy of language, he showed the superiority of his thinking over his contemporaries and many moderns.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of its seemingly convincing simplicity, the Porphyrian tree or, rather, the Porphyrian definitional procedure lacks consistency to a considerable degree. There are at least two severe shortcomings: Firstly, being in general and the so-called transcendentals, e.g. the trias of “*unum*”, “*verum*”, “*bonum*”, have no clear position in the Porphyrian architecture. Secondly, the individual substances, the bearers of intelligibility in every Aristotelian or post-Aristotelian system, are deprived of their status. Leaving the first problem aside, it is nevertheless indisputable for Weiss to abandon individualism because he feels obliged to defend the native rights of men.

If we try to give a dynamical interpretation of the Porphyrian tree, we may imagine a movement, originating from the top of the hierarchy and descending to the lower layers. Interestingly enough, there is a return to unity in Plotin, a dialectical interplay of the descending movement and the consecutive upward movement. For Weiss, the solution of Duns Scotus points in the same direction in that it strengthens the middle

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<sup>13</sup> P. Weiss, *Beyond All Appearances*, p. 126.

<sup>14</sup> P. Weiss, *Philosophy in Process*, Vol. 11, Albany (New York): State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Some additional information about our problem is to be found in: M. Malherbe / Ph. Gaudin, *Les Philosophies de l'humanité*, Paris: Bartillat, 1999.

layers of the hierarchy: Recapitulating his solution of the problem of the unity of God, he connects individual man with mankind by way of his theory of natures.<sup>16</sup>

We are now in the position to give a concise interpretation of the interrelationship of the three notions of man, mankind and humanity. In earlier years, Weiss had planned a trilogy of books, a study in philosophical anthropology<sup>17</sup>, a study in ethics<sup>18</sup>, and a study in political philosophy, centering on the thesis that man has native rights. Instead of publishing a systematic study on politics, Weiss submitted a series of essays to the public.<sup>19</sup> A systematic study on politics had to wait for more than thirty years and appeared eventually under the title *Toward a Perfected State* (1986). Here Weiss informs us about the conceptual connections of man, mankind, and humanity:

*“Each human is radically different from all others. [...].  
Every human is both a private and a public person. [...].  
What is abstractable from a person is ‘personhood’, a person shorn of all individuality. Mankind, instead, refers to a constant nature ingredient in every actual person. Where ‘personhood’ just isolates what is common to all persons, ‘mankind’ refers to what makes each person equal to every other. The two ideas meet in ‘human’. That is why the same humanity is abstractable from every individual, and is also locatable in a specialized form in each.”<sup>20</sup>*

Man is a rational being by his very nature, and this all-important truth holds for the human species and in the same way for the human individual. By the same reason, man in his privacy is already the bearer of native rights. Also, we take notice of the important fact that the same intrinsic relationship of man, mankind, and humanity is mirrored in the so-called Formula of the End in Itself of the categorical Imperative of Kant’s *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*:

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<sup>16</sup> As a surprising additional result, we now dispose of a transcendental characterization of our human world, the common-sense world: its physiognomy is build up and integrated by natures, universals embedded in appearances whose aesthetic value is significantly distinct from the cognitive value of the notions of speculative philosophy or the concepts of science.

<sup>17</sup> P. Weiss, *Nature and Man* (fn. 2).

<sup>18</sup> P. Weiss, *Man’s Freedom*, New Haven (Conn.): Yale University Press, 1950.

<sup>19</sup> P. Weiss, *Our Public Life*, Bloomington (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 1959; and, by the same author, *The Making of Men*, Carbondale (Ill.): Southern Illinois University Press, 1967. In a booklet under the title *Right and Wrong: A Philosophic Dialogue between Father and Son*, New York: Basic Books, 1967, the author criticizes the Democrats from the standpoint of a sympathizer.

<sup>20</sup> P. Weiss, *Toward a Perfected State*, Albany (New York): State University of New York Press, 1986, pp. 366 / 67. Weiss’s book was originally to appear under the title, *The Commonwealth*; this would have underlined its perfectionist tendency even more.

*“So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only.”<sup>21</sup>*

##### 5. *Man’s native rights, and the problem of representation*

One most difficult point in Weiss’s philosophy is to be seen in his refusal to accept the various forms of dualism which have shaped the landscape of modern philosophy. He does not accept the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter, as he does not accept the Humean dualism of “*be*” and “*ought*”. For him, man is the “*ought-to-be that is*”<sup>22</sup>, i.e. a creature that is subjected to a moral obligation in spite of his inability to fulfill it completely.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, he maintains that there is a natural law and that man is born with certain native rights, connecting this thesis with his theory of a radical origination of the self.

But natural law is unwritten law, and the native rights of men are only of a “*generic*” character or nature. Referring to J. Maritain, Weiss declares:

*“Man’s one right is the right to be a man. But this right is general, unspecific; it cannot be used or supported unless it is qualified by more specific rights. As a living, constantly altering and adjusting being, expressing himself in changing ways all the time, a man must be said to be the locus of an indeterminate number of specific rights. (...) To know what these are it is necessary to know just what are the indestructible, indispensable features of man, to deny which is to inhibit, to frustrate him.”<sup>24</sup>*

The above formula, namely, “*Man’s one right is the right to be a man.*”, is the paradigm case of what Weiss calls a “*trivial but important truth*”.<sup>25</sup> No one can deny the existence of certain native rights of men, indeterminate as they may be in number and content, without denying man’s right to be a man. That is to say, a pragmatic *reductio ad absurdum*, entertained from the standpoint of a sophisticated philosophy of common sense, removes any reasonable doubt as to the justification problem. Rather, the job for the philosopher of law is to specify these rights and to put their content in concrete terms.

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<sup>21</sup> I. Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. by T. K. Abbott, Rockville (Maryland): Manor, 2008, p. 47. *Vide* also H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative. A Study in Kant’s Moral Philosophy*, London: Hutchinson & Company Ltd, 1947.

<sup>22</sup> P. Weiss, *Beyond All Appearances*, 307 - 378.

<sup>23</sup> P. Weiss, *Man’s Freedom*, pp. 200 – 216 and *ibid.*, pp. 252 – 265.

<sup>24</sup> P. Weiss, *Our Public Life*, p. 67.

<sup>25</sup> In his treatise on education the author has another formula of this kind, namely, “*A child is a child*”. *Vide* P. Weiss, *The Making of Men*, p. 3.

Natural law can be traced back to ancient stoicism, especially to Cicero and Epictet, or to medieval philosophers such as St. Thomas Aquinas. In modern times, it has been propounded and defended by T. Hobbes, H. Grotius, H. Pufendorf, G. W. Leibniz and C. Wolff; these philosophers connected it usually with the so-called Golden Rule. Locke and Spinoza play an important role in that they propagated the idea of tolerance that gave modern man the courage to defend himself against an oppressive state. Locke, more than any other, transferred the idea of natural law to America.

C. Becker, historian of the Declaration of Independence, observes that the words “*nature*” and “*natural law*” had an overwhelming, even magical influence of the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers.<sup>26</sup> He draws the following most astonishing parallel between medieval and modern philosophy that reminds us of Weiss’s conviction that these epochs are complementary of one another, as it were:

*“The eighteenth century philosophers, like the medieval scholastics, held fast to a revealed body of knowledge (...). The essential articles of the religion of enlightenment may be stated thus: (1) man is not natively depraved; (2) the end of life is life itself, the good life on earth instead of the beatific life after death; (3) man is capable, guided solely by the light of reason and experience, of perfecting the good life on earth; (4) the first and essential condition of the good life on earth is the freeing of men’s minds from the bonds of ignorance and superstition, and of their bodies from the arbitrary oppression of the constituted social authorities.”<sup>27</sup>*

The philosophy of the late Paul Weiss centers on the problem of “*representation*”, i.e. the question of how the self “*in the guise of ‘any self’*” can become “*ideal*” or “*universal man*”.<sup>28</sup> He answers his question by a philosophy of excellence that follows up the traces of human creativity in nearly all fields of his activity: the arts, science, and politics, to mention only three.<sup>29</sup> For him, creativity or, more precisely, the “*dunamis*”, is a pulsative force that penetrates existence, operating in these fields according to their specific “*boundary conditions*”.<sup>30</sup> A specialization of the problem of representation is the legitimizing of the constitution that presupposes a solution of

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<sup>26</sup> T. Jefferson who formulated the Declaration of Independence, and B. Franklin who lent his authority to it, were both were inspired by this “climate of opinion” that spread from Europe to America.

<sup>27</sup> C. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1932, p. 102 / 03. Becker (*ibid.*, p. 103) speaks of the conception of “*man in general*”.

<sup>28</sup> P. Weiss, *Privacy*, pp. 316 – 20.

<sup>29</sup> P. Weiss, *Creative Ventures*.

<sup>30</sup> P. Weiss, *ibid.*, pp. 311 – 325.

the Hobbesian paradox of the identity of the rulers and the ruled.<sup>31</sup> But this is beyond my present interest.

K.-F. Kiesow, Leibniz University (Hanover, Germany)

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<sup>31</sup> P. Weiss, *Toward a Perfected State*, *passim*; *vide* P. Weiss, *Creative Ventures*, pp. 268 – 282. The problem of sovereignty is another example of a Hegelian “*identity in difference*” (fn. 11).

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