

# Nature and culture: blurring the borders

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**Abstract.** For many centuries, interpreting culture as something additional, constructed above nature, researchers have created the effect of their mutual alienation from one another. At present, new naturalism has undertaken the task to erase the borders between nature and culture, humans and animals. Representatives of this school oppose classical philosophical anthropology that proclaims man to be a special kind of being. The forefront of their thinking is taken by the nonhuman Other, natural world, the “thinking ocean” or the “information field of cosmic space”. The article offers a critical analysis of modern naturalistic approaches, considers the following issues: man as part of the natural kingdom or a special kind of being; the picture of the world is centered around man or develops without him; man as a product of the evolution of nature or a social creation, he is the crown of creation or a defective creature, etc. As has been shown, an attempt to avoid anthropocentrism by removing the anthropological theme as ultimately significant becomes inconsistent. The author comes to the conclusion that comprehension of man only by means of biology is impossible, and requires the expertise of the humanities as well.

## 1. Introduction

Modern philosophy has long ago made critical estimates of the illusions of enlightenment that elevated man above other natural creations. Certainly, man stands out against the background of the natural kingdom, but this does not make him a special kind of being. This point of view has become very popular with the development of the new naturalism project. But is that so? Can we bypass man in our theoretical interpretation of the universe?

## 2. Man between nature and culture

A turn to naturalistic understanding of the mind, language and culture began in the second half of the 20th century. This stance is in many respects associated with the achievements of biological sciences. Advocates of naturalism, in fact, refuse to study man’s historicity. They look for human self-identity in the evolution of biological life forms. Moreover, many followers of this school hold that only such a naturalistic, not historical, approach would

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allow us to solve the complex problems of the opposition of nature and culture. Therefore, not only comprehension of man himself, but the study of culture and society are to be naturalised.

J.-M. Schaeffer, proclaiming the “end of the human exception”, puts forward the thesis about the absence of an opposition between nature and culture. He holds that humankind as a biological species has a unity, and its appearance is only part of the history of the living world existing on the earth. According to the French philosopher, “...man’s social and cultural being does not cut him off his biological being but serves as special parameters or aspects of his biological being <...> the social and the cultural are deeply dependent on the biological...” [1, p. 11]. The fact that man is a social being is an expression of his biological specificity. And the fact that man creates culture is not at all indicative of his uniqueness, since human culture, according to Schaeffer, is one among other animal cultures. In this case humans should not be opposed to animals and even cannot be called an exception, they are just living beings among others.

Criticizing the thesis of the human exception, Schaeffer, in our view, overlooks many things. Following other philosophical anthropologists, we can specify the traits, which to a certain extent are characteristic of humans alone. Fedor Girenok, for example, believes that this is the ability to hallucinate and imagine; asociality to the extent to which man is autistic; his unreasonableness compared with animal rationality; the possibility to “invent language” [2]. We can speak of man’s “all-understanding”, of his specific emotional world, of the transcendent feeling, spirituality, values, etc.

Pavel Gurevich writes: “There are reasons to believe that the transcendent feeling is man’s most precious acquisition. It conditions the parameters of spirituality, of a search for the world of ideal entities, of divine faith. That is why man equally belongs to two – earthly and heavenly – worlds. This two-worldness, in our opinion, constitutes the essence of man. Adam’s descendant can transform, change his own nature, become a cyborg, cybernaut. But abolishment of human transcendence is that very limit, beyond which man disappears and there appears a new cybernetic miracle” [3, pp. 50–51].

We would also like to draw more attention to the fact that in the arguments of J.-M. Schaeffer man loses the existential strain, inherent in his species. “Man is a being that has no niche of his own. But it is not a sign, it is a contradiction of his being. All there is in man seems to negate itself. Man belongs to nature, but at the same time he is torn away from it. He has instincts, but they do not act as unfailing stimulators of his behaviour. Man wields power over nature and at the same time deserts it. He has certain fixed signs, but they are ambiguous and escape final definitions. Man has a tragic understanding of the ways of his existence, and each particular individual reopens this truth over and over again...” [4, p. 53]. Man is an immature being, and there is no way for him to be moulded into the final shape.

Undoubtedly, the achievements of natural sciences transform our knowledge about man. There appears a desire to more deeply submerge into the study of his biological nature. In this connection, criticism of the introspective methods of self-justification of the spirit becomes stronger. And researches on the human genome, the possibilities of the brain, etc. receive special interest.

The Canadian-American scientist Steven Pinker, one of the leaders of new naturalism, sharply criticizes the sociological tradition in the scientific study of man. He calls it the theory of the “blank slate” [5], built on the false conviction that man is a product of culture. Culture, he holds, can be seen as a part of the human phenotype, emerging naturally from his social nature and ability to learn. S. Pinker, starting an “honest conversation about human nature”, sets great hopes on the study of the human genome, which, in his view, promise an “unprecedented understanding of the genetic roots of intellect and emotions”. He believes that the decoding of the human genome will permit to explain all social

phenomena as well, and then there will be no doubt left about the primacy of human animalness.

S. Pinker repeatedly stands up for recognition of human nature, but he understands it as inherent, biologically conditioned properties. (Similarly, for example, E. V. de Castro interprets the notion of personality as an “aspect of a biosocial multiplicity”, potentially available for any kind or mode of being, and not as the ultimate expression of the human in man.) The new conception of human nature proposed by Pinker will, in his opinion, form a bridge between biology and culture by developing cognitive sciences, neurobiology, behavioural genetics, evolutionary psychology. But in fact it is only an attempt by means of science to calculate human behaviour, to explain the nature of reason, to interpret the emotional world of man.

The Canadian-American scientist argues that thinking, intellect, imagination and creativity are forms of the well studied and quite material information processing. Learning is based on the inheritance mechanism. An infinite range of human behaviour was generated by a limited set of combinatorial programmes in the mind. Thinking and emotions are built into the brain. The whole potential of thinking, learning and feeling that distinguishes humans from other animals is contained in information recorded in DNA. Man is the product of natural selection, and all his faculties, including reason, developed in the process of evolution. All these ideas drive Pinker to the conclusion that the “spirit” can be retired with gratitude. Therefore, nowadays we see the so widespread tendency to desacralization of our knowledge of man and the world, and the naïve confidence in scientific explanation of human nature. In the course of such reasoning culture becomes depreciated, turning into a set of adaptive mechanisms and technological programmes.

### 3. Critique of anthropocentrism

The abolishment of the anthropological theme as the ultimately significant one gives birth to an illusion of rising above the anthropocentric stance. The American anthropologist Eduardo Kohn sets himself the task to break “open the circular closure that otherwise confines us when we seek to understand the distinctively human by means of that which is distinctive to humans” [6, p. 6]. He criticizes modern sociocultural anthropology for consideration of the attributes that are distinctive to humans – language, culture, society, history, – and using them as tools to understand humans. E. Kohn suggests undertaking serious research of nonhuman beings, calling his approach an “anthropology beyond the human”. The main goal of his approach is “to appreciate how the human is also the product of that which lies beyond human contexts” [6, p. 15].

New naturalism asserts the linguistic, communicative and mental affinity between humans and animals. Kohn attempts to re-think human language and its relationships with other forms of representation, which we share with nonhuman beings. He shows that for nonhuman beings language becomes (iconic and indexical) signs, which are not symbolic. According to Kohn, all beings are constitutively semiotic, and life and thought are, in important ways, one and the same. In this case, the possibility to single out man from the natural world as the only carrier of language disappears. Human language is symbolic but it is only one of the language tools along with its other possibilities.

The central place in Kohn’s anthropology belongs to animism declaring that animateness is a property of the world. Kohn leans on modern theories of animism developed by the French researcher Phillippe Descola [7, 8, 9] and the Brazil anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro [10, 11]. Kohn believes that animateness emerges together with life and only living beings can be called loci of selfhood. Conducting ethnographic research among the Runa people, native inhabitants of the Ecuadorian part of the tropical Amazon, the American anthropologist describes a complex network of relationships between various

beings, calling it the ecology of selves. Humans recognize other selves as equal to themselves only until we decide to bereave them of this selfhood, making them not subjects but objects. (We can come across analogous arguments when reading J. Bataille, where he discusses the difference between animals and things [12].) But a predator can deprive man of his selfhood, regarding him only as prey. In this sense, E. Kohn did not make any difference between humans and animals either.

Finally, the American anthropologist arrives at the conclusion that there is nothing exclusively human in the full sense of this word, and the study of man is dependent on understanding him in the world of nonhuman Others. "All living selves, human and nonhuman, are continuously involved in iconic and indexical semiotic processes. They interpret sounds, soil, each other, etc. We should acknowledge all these processes, writes Kohn, as part of the thinking process. All selves are involved in thinking, but not in all it is symbolic. In other words, icons and indices are a variety of the thinking process. This type of thinking is not characteristic only of animals and humans but also of plants" [13, p. 13].

Therefore, E. Kohn attempts at extending the limits of semiosis beyond the human, putting in question the opposition of the notions of nature and culture [14]. But within the framework of his arguments we can say nothing about man, the human disappears and the nonhuman Other comes to the forefront.

An attempt to overcome anthropocentrism also becomes a failure, since knowledge of the universe, in some way of another, is obtained through man. He can be regarded in different ways: as a cognizing subject, as a psyche, as a peculiar membrane. But in all variations, man preserves his status of an extremely important object of comprehension.

## 4. Conclusion

In modern philosophical-anthropological doctrines the human not only turns out to be under suspicion, but also has been deprived of its unique, specific qualities. Man has been dissolved in another, more significant entity, be it cosmic space, life, environment, etc. We cannot but agree that nowadays naturalism threatens to flood the whole space of modern philosophical-anthropological thought and to remove the metaphysical themes from philosophy, transferring the discourse onto the plane of natural scientific thinking [15, 16].

Certainly, the naturalistic view on human nature is by no means the only in modern philosophical anthropology [17]. One more tendency can be observed – a search for the uniqueness of the human mind in sociality, spirituality, transcendence. And not all researchers, including prominent philosophers who made a significant contribution to the humanities, say, M. Foucault or J. Derrida, are ready to be recruited to take this stance.

The diversity of knowledge about man and culture, in our opinion, does not allow us to reduce all ideas to the naturalistic approach. The existential strain arising from man's belonging to two worlds – nature and culture – drives us to think over the contradiction between them. Although it does not mean that culture should be examined outside nature. They exist only together with one another. Culture is nature recreated by man, who thus affirms himself as human.

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