

PALEOANTHROPOLOGY FROM A PHENOMENOLOGICAL
POINT OF VIEW. SOME REMARKS ABOUT THE GENETIC
STRUCTURES OF HUMAN LIFE

There is undoubtedly one question that has always haunted humanity: the question of its origin. In the nineteenth century, this topic entered the field of scientific research. The years 1850–1860 yielded, mainly in France and Germany, a good crop of human fossils, and of remains of extinct animal species as well as stone tools attributable, though they were quite crude, to human activity. All these vestiges were extracted here and there from the depths of the ground. Jacques Boucher de Perthes, a pioneer in this field, thought that the discovered stone tools could only belong to a certain “pre-Celtic” or “antediluvian antiquity.”¹ This was deduced on the basis of their geological situation and their frequent association with the remains of extinct animal species. For the first time in history, scientists were materially confronted with the great antiquity of mankind and its works and then undertook to study that on the basis of scientific principles.

Yet, though it was impossible at that time to scientifically date the age of man, we could try to plot his evolution. Lamarck and Darwin, as is well-known, developed the hypothesis that there are ancestral links between the species. Lamarck can be considered the father of evolutionism with his theory of the gradual and continuous transformation of organisms under the influence of environmental changes. According to his theory, the simplest forms of life appeared first and then progressively changed under the influence of external circumstances. They eventually gave birth to other kinds of living beings and to man himself.² In his book *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, Darwin tried to understand the appearance and the diversification of new species throughout time. And according to him, the mechanism that explains this evolution is “natural selection.”³

Darwin was at first not particularly concerned with the origin of man and focused more on the diversification of the species. Therefore, he had apparently less influence than Lamarck on the first French prehistorians. Within a transformist framework, they attempted to give substance to a certain temporality that preceded history. In the 1870’s Gabriel de Mortillet, for instance, was convinced that transformism was the basic principle explaining nature, including man and his works. According to him, different

human races succeeded one another. Contemporary humanity is the most accomplished stage of this evolution. The analysis of stone tool “industrial” sites attributed to the end of the Tertiary era led him to consider the artefacts the production of living beings who were intelligent enough to process flint but not intelligent enough to be considered human beings. His idea was to label them the “precursors of man,”⁴ i.e., *anthropopithecus*, whom he ranked halfway between the current anthropoid ape and man. Yet, a gap rapidly presented itself given the rarity, or even nonexistence, of remains of this *anthropopithecus* and the abundance of hewn stones attributed to him. This idea that the original man was preceded by an intermediate creature between ape and man did not have a basis in actual evidence but only in a transformist paradigm. This concept obviously got into trouble, as I am going to shortly show.

In 1892, Doctor Eugène Dubois exhumed the remains of a creature that combined ape-like (his skullcap had enormous brow ridges and was of small size) and human characteristics (lack of a sagittal crest at the top of the cranium, the thighbone indicates an upright position). He labeled him “*pithecanthropus*” and thought he had discovered what Haeckel called the “missing link.” Yet, because very few vestiges were available, doubts were expressed as far as the reliability of this discovery was concerned. Forty years later, some excavations carried out in Chou-kou-tien, in China, proved the fully human nature of that being who had then to be considered as “*Homo erectus*.”

In 1924, Raymond Dart thought he had discovered in *Australopithecus africanus* (the name he gave of a small child whose cranium was exhumed in Taung, South Africa), the genuine missing link. The skull of that child, in spite of its small volume (500cm³), is more evolved than what we know of with the living or fossilized ape, but at the same time it is far more primitive than any fossilized man. At first welcomed with scepticism by scientists, this discovery was then corroborated by Broom’s discoveries in the 1930s. *Australopithecus* (the southern ape “of South”) became a candidate for the precursor of man.

However, from the 1960s onwards, discoveries of *Australopithecus* increased. This brought new genres (*Paranthropus*, *Zinjanthropus*, . . .) and new hypotheses on their phylogenesis, on the settling of *Australopithecus* and on its geographical movements. Yet, this profusion of hypotheses, which mainly aims at finding a solution to the problem of the filiation between the genus *Australopithecus* and the genus *Homo*, seemed to indicate a certain perplexity on the part of scientists as far as the origin of man was concerned

and even the necessity of raising some methodological questions. For instance, we could wonder whether the intermediate stage between man and ape would not finally remain empty. That's precisely what the French ethnologist and prehistorian André Leroi-Gourhan suggested. In 1964, in his major book, *Le geste et le parole*, he refused to give that empty space to the *Australopithecus*. According to him, these were creatures which, in spite of a low volume of his brainpan, stood up and could devise tools. Because of that very characteristic, they were even worthy of the name of man, of being classed the genus *Homo*. Thus, it would appear that *Australopithecus* is wrongly named. Leroi-Gourhan would like to substitute the label "*Australopithecus*" with that of "australanthrope." "The first designation is an inappropriate term that dates back to a period when these creatures were considered to be sophisticated apes."⁵ But they are not to be seen as the result of a phyletic tendency that would have first materialized in some rough simian creatures that then released themselves progressively from animality. "Man is not, as we were used to think, a kind of ape that is constantly improving, the majestic crowning achievement of the paleontological evolution, but something other than an ape."⁶

This quotation shows how Leroi-Gourhan considers the problem of the origin of man. Indeed, when he wrote that "we have to show that in the evolution of the vertebrates, the path leading to technical knowledge and language started *at the very beginning*,"⁷ he meant that our task is not to determine when it precisely started or when monkeys turned into men. His goal is actually to show that paleontology, throughout its anthropian tradition, has found neither any transitional form between ape and man, nor any evidence showing a gradual shift between the quadruped gait and a more vertical position, or showing any shift between the use of raw materials by animals and the making of tools. Man represents a discontinuous start and was anticipated by no transitional form: "The biological origin of man is necessarily to be found," he wrote, "beyond the imprecise zone of transitions."⁸ It is therefore inevitable to admit that the question of the origin of man has to be raised in terms other than those of the evolutionist tradition. This does not mean that the author denies the existence of a certain evolution or of the temporal succession of various living species. On the contrary, if there is "one certainty, that no convincing demonstration can shake, it is the idea that the world is constantly improving throughout history."⁹ However, as far as man is concerned, his evolution can just be seen as a maturation of what is already human, i.e., the maturation of a creature whose upright position is recognized, who correlatively has a short face as well as a free hand while

moving. "As soon as the upright position is established, even if some adjustments still have to be made in posture, we no longer have an ape, and therefore no half-a-man."¹⁰

Clearly enough, the *specificity* of human anatomy is undeniable: This anatomy looks mainly like ours but differs from that of other primates. However, this specificity can just be regarded as a differentiation on the basis of a *fundamental living community*. In the history of life, Leroi-Gourhan wrote, "the position of man is neither a compromise nor a divorce, it does not look any more like a hypertrophied animality than like a negation of the laws of the living world."¹¹ The exceptional nature of the anthropian adventure does not mean at all that it stands apart from the morpho-genetic processes at work in the living world. We rather have to admit that the origin of man can just be considered as a form of originality of the human body: "The originality of man lies perhaps less in his biological dissimilarity than in the fact that this creature is human without having lost anything from the continuity of the living world."¹²

In this perspective, the question of the origin of man can be related to the genetic investigation of Husserl's phenomenology. Indeed, Leroi-Gourhan's objective, as I have said, was not to find hypothetical transitions between pithecomorphism and anthropomorphism but to spot an evolutive divergence towards a totally original way of being, that of man. Yet, Leroi-Gourhan tried to show that this mainly technical and symbolical way of being, took root in a particular organisation of capacities, the ability to walk, and a way of touching and exploring the surrounding world. In this way, general body shape can be perceived as the *source of meaningful acts and gestures within the world*. In *Ideen II* and in the *Krisis*, Husserl focused on the transcendental correlation between the world and the subjective and intersubjective life for which the world has a sense and a value. He undertook to go down very deep into human experience, where the world gives itself to a perceiving living being and therefore refers to the flesh, to a "here-perceiving," which is mobile by definition. And it is precisely in the depths of this subjective-carnal life that he wanted to think about the genesis of the meanings of the world-of-life or about the genesis of the meaning of world experience. This "archaeological"¹³ process seems to promise that parallels can be drawn between phenomenology and paleoanthropology.

I am precisely going to show that Leroi-Gourhan and Husserl have a common point: the fact that they raise decisive methodological questions. First of all, both wondered whether it were possible to have *access* to ancient human experiences and to meaning development. I would like to deal here

with the problem of *empathy*. Secondly, if paleontology commonly reconstructs the body shapes of *Australopithecus* or of *Homo erectus*, as well as their surrounding environments, the question is that of determining how it is possible to carry out such a *reconstruction*. On that very point, Leroi-Gourhan's reflections seem to me very close again to Husserl's thoughts.

1) Finding links between Leroi-Gourhan's work and Husserl's phenomenological research is not self-evident. Is it really possible to compare such different disciplines — Husserl's phenomenology, a transcendental science of consciousness, and Leroi-Gourhan's paleoanthropology, a natural science among others that fully takes part in the interests of the objective sciences? One piece of evidence that enables us to prove that Husserl did not simply reject the lessons of anthropology is the attention he paid to Lévy-Bruhl's works. In a letter written on March, 11th, 1935, Husserl described to Lévy-Bruhl "the impassioned interest" with which he had read his book.¹⁴ And if he had some reservations about a positive anthropology, the science of the living being in an objective world and of the real existence of humanity, though relative within the world,¹⁵ he recognised — and this is the most interesting point of that letter to Lévy-Bruhl — that this science clearly gives birth to the possibility of a mutual understanding, of an *empathy* that would materialize the goal of an *Einführung*.¹⁶

Leroi-Gourhan also dealt in his own way with "empathy." In an interview of 1982 centered on his job as an ethnologist and prehistorian, he declared his only goal to be to find contacts with the man of the past.¹⁷ He had got interested in objects and human artefacts that were produced in the very remote past, and he could on that basis state that "behind those works we had to look for man."¹⁸ But what kind of relationships with paleolithic man does the author want to have, since that man disappeared ten thousand years ago or perhaps millions of years ago? The author explained that "when you find in a grave the remains of a very old man, that's a memory we want to catch. When you exhume an *Australopithecus*, you bring to life a memory that would not otherwise have existed, you retrieve someone that did not leave any memory to anybody, you create a kind of memory *a posteriori*, a sort of 'retro-memory.'"¹⁹ Obviously, Leroi-Gourhan is motivated by the idea of recreating, of achieving a certain comprehension of, a certain affinity or *Einführung* with the man of the past, either a close predecessor, like the Neanderthals or a more ancient one like *Australopithecus*.

Here, to deal with the concrete work of the paleoanthropologist, Leroi-Gourhan was not far from using a concept described by Husserl in a text found in his *Nachlass*, namely, the concept of "historical empathy."²⁰ As

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Book I

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