

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL HORIZON:  
MAX SCHELER, ARNOLD GEHLEN AND THE IDEA  
OF A PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology today...is not only the name of a discipline; the term denotes a fundamental tendency characteristic of the present position of man with regard to himself and to all that is. According to this tendency, a thing is understood only when it receives an anthropological explanation. Today, anthropology not only seeks the truth concerning man but also claims to have the power of deciding the meaning of truth as such. No other epoch has accumulated so great and so varied a store of knowledge concerning man as the present one. No other epoch has succeeded in presenting its knowledge of man so forcibly and so captivately as ours, and no other has succeeded in making this knowledge so quickly and so easily accessible. But also, no epoch is less sure of its knowledge of what man is than the present one. In no other epoch has man appeared so mysterious as in ours.

The words are those of Martin Heidegger: the source a book<sup>1</sup> first published in 1929 and dedicated to the memory of the philosopher Max Scheler, who had died the year before.

But what is Heidegger talking about? Of 'anthropology' to be sure, but certainly not as it is commonly conceived in Britain,

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (transl. J.S. Churchill), Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1962, p.216.

where 'anthropology' is identified, primarily, with the discipline of social and cultural anthropology and, popularly, with the study of 'exotic', non-Western, societies. The clue to Heidegger's usage lies in the dedication of the book to Scheler. For Scheler is commonly regarded as the founder of the tradition of what came, in Central Europe between the wars, to be called 'philosophical anthropology'. My purpose in this paper is to introduce some of the central figures, ideas and problems of this tradition, which has, thus far, received little attention in England.

Scheler is the seminal figure of modern philosophical anthropology, whose later works, especially the posthumously published essay *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*,<sup>2</sup> provide a recurring point of reference for his successors. One of the aims of this paper must therefore be to elucidate what Scheler, his followers and critics, mean by 'philosophical anthropology', as well as to sketch something of the content of his work and of the ways in which his heritage was taken up and, more often than not, transformed in the years after his death. The latter topic is vast, and for practical reasons I shall largely confine my discussion of post-Schelerian philosophical anthropology to the work of Arnold Gehlen, especially his influential treatise *Der Mensch: seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*.<sup>3</sup>

The juxtaposition of Gehlen's name to that of Scheler is apt for many reasons. Historically speaking, *Der Mensch* is a classic in the post-Schelerian tradition. It has run through many editions since it was first published in 1940; and it is frequently referred to, not least by radical writers, such as Jürgen Habermas and the theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who recognise the importance of a work whose implications for society they find unsympathetic and whose author's political views they regard with understandable suspicion. For Gehlen, a major figure in German sociology until his death in 1976, established his academic reputation under the Third Reich, and in post-war years became the leading theorist of a resurgent German conservatism. If Habermas, the pre-eminent representative of the younger generation of the Frankfurt School, and Moltmann, the fount of much of what is now termed 'liberation theology', take *Der Mensch* so seriously, so, I suggest, should we.

But there is more than historical importance in the examination of the relationship between Scheler's work and Gehlen's. Not only did the twelve years that elapsed between the publication

<sup>2</sup> Bern: Francke Verlag 1927; translated as *Man's Place in Nature* (Hans Meyerhoff, Boston: Beacon Press 1958). In preparing this essay I have used Frank Dunlop's as yet unpublished translation which renders the title more accurately as *The Place of Man in the Cosmos*, from which all quotations are taken. I wish to acknowledge my thanks for his permission to use this translation and for the benefit I have gained from his knowledge of both Scheler's and Gehlen's works. His translation of Gehlen's important essay 'Human Nature and Institutions' will appear in *The Salisbury Review* (Vol. IV no.2, January 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Berlin 1940; a translation of this work will be published by Columbia University Press in the course of 1986.

of Scheler's *Die Stellung* and Gehlen's *Der Mensch* see the rise to power of a regime in which the question of what is and what is not a fully human being became a matter of life and death for millions; but Gehlen's selective development of Scheler's themes amounts to a thorough-going naturalization of the older thinker's metaphysical and ultimately religious vision of man's nature and condition. This development is signalled in the replacement of Scheler's term *Kosmos* by the more sober-sounding *Welt* to refer to the context of man's existence in the title of Gehlen's book. Examination of the consequences of this process of naturalization - Gehlen's replacement of an avowedly metaphysical frame of reference with one that is self-consciously natural-scientific - brings to light some of the most important problems hidden in the depths of Kant's deceptively simple question: 'What is Man?'

In view of the prospects opened up for the human race by developments in genetic engineering these problems are of great practical importance, quite apart from their theoretical interest.<sup>4</sup> Assumptions about human nature exercise an influence on our decisions even - perhaps especially - when they are not thought through and made explicit. The explication of the nature of man, its constituent features and attendant consequences, is something that Scheler and his successors tried to provide. Whatever we think of their answers, the questions they asked are ones we ignore at our peril.

In his essay 'Man and History', Scheler remarks, as Heidegger and so many others were to do, on the paradox that in an age in which historical, biological and ethnographic studies have added so much to our empirical knowledge of men, the essence of what it is to be a Man escapes us in a way that it has never seemed to do before. Ours is an age of competing *Weltanschauungen*, each of which has, at its centre, a particular image of man. At such a time the construction of a philosophical anthropology is the most urgent problem of philosophy. By 'philosophical anthropology' he means

a basic science which investigates the *essence* and essential constitution of man, his relationship to the realms of nature (organic, plant and animal life) as well as to the source of all things, man's metaphysical origin as well as his physical, psychic and spiritual origins in the world, the forces and powers which move man and which he moves, the fundamental trends and laws of his biological, psychic, cultural and social evolution along with their essential capabilities and realities.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Hans Jonas's essays 'Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subject' and 'Biological Engineering: A Preview', both in his *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Univ. of Chicago Press 1974, and his more recent *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, idem., 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Scheler, op.cit., in *Philosophical Perspectives* (transl. O.A. Haac), Boston: Beacon Press 1958, p.65.

Scheler intended to realize this characteristically ambitious project in two complementary treatises devoted, respectively, to philosophical anthropology and to metaphysics. Neither was ever written. Two years after 'Man and History' was published Scheler was dead, leaving behind a sketch of what might have been in *The Place of Man in the Cosmos*. Though only an overview of the themes to be developed in the two unwritten books, *Die Stellung* (as I shall henceforth refer to it) reflects Scheler's lifelong concern with the inseparable questions: 'What is man?' and 'What is man's place in the nature of things?' The result is a dense but brilliantly suggestive essay which more than adequately illustrates the dualistic theory of human nature - man as both a particular form of life and a uniquely spiritual being - which is the hallmark of his anthropology. This is not the absolute dualism of a Descartes, whose model of man, as immaterial mind set somehow in a mechanistically conceived body, results in the ultimately unintelligible model of 'the ghost in the machine'. Scheler's is a qualified dualism which bridges the gap between body and soul - a gap which emerges in pure philosophical meditation but which is quite unknown in man's experience of himself as a living being. The mystery of the origins of what man experiences as the spiritual aspect of his being still remains in Scheler's theory - it is a central topic of his metaphysics - but the gulf that yawns between a purely spiritually conceived mind and a mechanistically conceived, material body in the Cartesian view of man is considerably reduced by the attention Scheler pays to the unique characteristics of living beings. While Descartes' dualism knows only immaterial soul and material body, defined as extension in space and characterised as being mechanistically ordered, Scheler sets the study of man within the context of an examination of organic nature - a realm of being whose uniqueness Descartes denies. Since the result of this denial is to make man an unintelligible compound and to class animals as unthinking, unfeeling machines, Scheler's philosophy of the organism, which sets the agenda for his successors as well, deserves our attention no less than his attempt to vindicate the reality of 'spirit' in a world of otherwise scientifically measurable facts.

The thesis that man's form of life is distinct within the sphere of nature is corroborated by evidence drawn from the life sciences, from biology and from genetic and comparative psychology. The argument that this is not all there is to man - that in addition to being a species of living organism man is also the embodiment of 'spirit' in the world - is developed in two ways. Negatively, Scheler tries to show that the categories we can derive from the idea and experience of organic nature are inadequate to explain crucial aspects of human existence. Positively, he refers to the source of spirit as a constitutive factor of man's being to an admittedly speculative metaphysics, related to but also different from the metaphysical systems of Spinoza and Hegel - according to which the process of reality as a whole, and of man's being as an enduring moment in this process, must be understood in terms of the interpenetration of two originally distinct principles, spirit

and drive. With the emergence of man as a unique form of life, driven like other species by organic compulsions but not motivated by them alone, 'spirit' - powerless until incarnate in the human being - enters the world as a formative factor.

Ours is neither a time nor a place which takes kindly to this sort of metaphysical speculation; but Scheler thought it essential to man's knowledge of himself and the cosmos he inhabits. Gehlen, for one, found this aspect of Scheler's work both unacceptable in and unnecessary to a critically tenable philosophical anthropology. In this, at least, a British audience is likely to share Gehlen's view. To that audience, I can only say 'be patient'. The proof of this particular pudding is in the eating; and the metaphysical ingredient is an essential part of the recipe. Its value is not to be judged by taking a spoonful of pure, Schelerian metaphysics on its own, but by noting what it contributes to the final product. To those tough-minded souls who consider themselves allergic to everything that smacks of 'unscientific', metaphysical speculation, I plead only that they withhold judgement until they can compare Scheler's anthropology with Gehlen's rival product from which metaphysics has been as far as possible removed. After all, how many people who purport to detest the taste of garlic find a salad dressed without it mysteriously incomplete?

At all events, even in the scheme of Scheler's essay, the metaphysical component comes not at the beginning but towards the end. The opening sections of *Die Stellung* are concerned only with understanding man's being as a distinct form of life. Scheler develops a typology of life forms, plant, animal, man - a morphology quite compatible with a scientific, naturalistic understanding of human evolution. Let us recall that the tasks of morphology and of natural history are analytically distinct. While Darwinian evolutionary theory may explain how the diverse types of living being come into existence, the business of morphology, the theory of forms, is to elucidate what features make each genus and species itself and no other. Sociobiology, as practised by E.O. Wilson and his followers, tends to dissolve morphology in evolutionary theory. This, I believe, leads inevitably to an underestimation of the distinctiveness of life forms, including that of man. There can, in the last resort, be no incompatibility between morphological description of the life forms, specific characteristics and modes of existence, of different species, and a natural historical theory which hypothetically explains their origins. However, the reduction of morphology to being a derivative of natural history results not only in the dogmatism of particular scientific hypotheses - by making a naturalistically conceived evolutionary theory the unquestionable premise which determines a priori what can exist - but, in the case of man in particular, leads to far-fetched attempts to identify unique features of existence (religion and art, for instance) with aspects of the lives of other animals. It is one of the virtues of the philosophical anthropological tradition that it is both willing to ground the philosophy of man in a philosophy of nature, and able to recognise that, even where parallels between human and non-human life exist, the features in question must be understood in the context of qualitatively dis-

tinct forms of life.<sup>6</sup> In this, it stands in stark contrast not only to sociobiology, but also to the prevailing trends in social science which, no less one-sidedly, ignore the organic aspects of man's being in their efforts to establish a pure sociological model of man - man as though formed by social forces alone.

A morphology need not be exhaustive in order to be instructive. To understand man's unique mode of existence we do not require an encyclopaedic knowledge of every other species, but only of such aspects of the general phenomenon of life against which man's peculiarities stand out. It is in this context that we must understand Scheler's distinction between 'man' and 'animal'. As Gehlen was later to point out, to contrast man with animal does not entail denying that man is, in fact, a type of animal, nor that, in almost every way, he has more in common with such an animal as the chimpanzee than the latter has with his fellow animals, the giraffe and the amoeba. The juxtaposition of man to animal serves the sole but essential purpose of bringing into focus just what it is that is unique to our particular species.

That there is much we share with other life forms and that these shared characteristics, such as the sexual urge and the need for foods, are also constitutive of man's being is something that philosophical anthropology tends to emphasise rather than deny. But in a world inhabited by distinct species, careful discrimination is the high road to understanding. Philosophical anthropology makes it its business to understand one such species, our own. And this requires delineation of just what it is that makes us distinct in the community of life. We gain this knowledge by comparing what is human with what is not. That man is a distinct species is something no one is going to deny. That he is a species of animal and not of plant is no less certain. Thus by comparing the particular species, man, with the generality of other beings we recognise as animals, and by discerning what is discoverable in human existence but nowhere else in the animal kingdom - 'kingdoms' for instance - we learn something of what is essential and uniquely human. The legitimacy of the procedure has nothing to do with any special value we may attach to the existence of our own species. Comparison with a view to discrimination is a part of any enquiry in the life sciences; whether its object be the identification of a cancerous cell, the distinction between the Black Rhinoceros and the White, the nature of human anatomy or the anatomy of human nature.

Scheler paints his picture with broad strokes, drawing in only such details of the various forms of life as are necessary to his, strictly anthropological, purpose. We shall follow his example, tailoring discussion of his essay to those aspects most relevant in an introduction to the idea of a philosophical anthropology as he and his successors conceived it. Enough has already been said to inform the reader that what Scheler has in mind as he proceeds, step by careful step, through the examination of the levels of

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, F.J.J. Buytendijk, *Mensch und Tier*, Hamburg: Rohwolt 1958 (transl. Rémi Laureillard, *L'Homme et l'animal: Essai de Psychologies comparée*, Paris: Gallimard 1965).

organic life - first plant life, with its undifferentiated 'drives' towards nutrition and reproduction, and then animal life in its increasingly complex forms, from amoeba to chimpanzee - is to reach the point at which the distinction of man will begin to appear. *Die Stellung*, indeed, began life as a lecture entitled 'The Unique Place of Man' delivered in Darmstadt in 1927 - and that title expresses as well as any what Scheler aimed to establish.

Is there not, however, something contradictory in referring to both 'broad strokes' and 'careful steps' in characterizing Scheler's text? Given the style of Scheler's argument, I think not. The empirical examples with which he illustrates his thesis are few but telling. The argument moves logically from one step to the next: first, the effort to define man's unique life form as it emerges against the background of the various, successively more complex modes of organic existence; then the attempt to show that man's real distinction is something more than the distinctiveness of one type of organism among others; and finally, the endeavour to make this mark of ontological distinction intelligible in the context of an all-encompassing metaphysics.

Scheler was under no illusion that his task was an easy one. The human and the natural sciences have told us so much about the variety of human societies, about the complexity of the natural universe, inorganic and organic, and about the relationships of dependence and interdependence between one aspect of the world and another, that the very idea of talking about 'man's place in the cosmos' may seem presumptuous. Is 'man' in fact definable? Has he any identifiable, ontologically settled 'place' in the overall scheme of things? And what, in heaven or earth, is 'the cosmos'? Can the philosophical anthropologist do anything more than add yet another 'world view' to the catalogue of those already available on the intellectual and ideological market? If that is all he wants to do, the task is easy enough, though whether anyone will attend to what he says is another matter. But Scheler is more ambitious than that. There is indeed a distinct metaphysical and religious world view in his text, and a very contentious one too. But *Die Stellung* is much more than a piece of special pleading for a particular outlook on life. Scheler's ability to marshal corroborative, scientific evidence in the context of a single illuminating argument is remarkable; and, as Gehlen was to prove, one did not have to accept Scheler's conclusions in order to learn from the steps by which he reached them. One of the marks of Gehlen's response to Scheler's work is precisely the way in which he was able to learn from the anthropology while rejecting the metaphysics in which it was implicated.

The argument of *Die Stellung* is a single coherent thesis, but the elements which make it up also have a completeness and coherence of their own. That is why, while there are no Schelerians as there are, for example, Marxists and Feudians, the work could provide a prime point of reference for some of modern Europe's most prominent exponents of biological and psychological theory as well as setting the agenda for successors in the field of philosophical

anthropology.<sup>7</sup> *Die Stellung* provides not a doctrine of life but a framework, one might almost say a display case, for the issues crucial to understanding man's nature and condition.

Within the realm of animal life, Scheler distinguishes three levels of psychic process, each of which is a specification of the general and fundamental 'feeling drive'. *Gefühlsdrang*, characteristic of all organisms and found already, in undifferentiated form, in the unconscious 'movement' of plants 'into' the ground and 'toward' the light.<sup>8</sup> Such drives, essential to sustenance, and reproduction, are the defining mark of organic being. The form of drive, unconscious and, as it were, automatic, found in plant life persists in animal and human life (for example, in the digestive system), but as we turn to the level of animal life, it is supplemented by more specific forms of psychic activity - by instinct, by associative memory and by intelligence. Each of these represents an advance in complexity and specificity within the organism; and while the first, instinct, is found even in the simplest animal, the others, associative memory (i.e. conditioned reflexes and the ability to learn from experience) and intelligence (which Scheler defines as 'a sudden burst of insight into a complex of fact and value within the environment'), appear only as we encounter the higher forms of animal life.

Instinctive behaviour follows a fixed, unalterable pattern and represents a response to typically recurring events in the life of a species. The animal does not learn instinctual behaviour by trial and error. It is ingrained in its genetic formation and is the precondition of its continuing existence. The activity of the simplest animals is characterised by its wholly instinctive nature. In higher animals we find in addition a capacity to learn by trial and error, but this is not yet intelligence as Scheler defines it. Is 'intelligence', then, the hallmark of man? In rejecting this common view, Scheler opens the way to the uncommon perspective of his variety of metaphysical dualism.

Scheler had been deeply impressed by the results of the experiments with chimpanzees conducted by Wolfgang Köhler at the German research station on Tenerife. The findings, published in 1925, showed that the problem-solving activities of the chimpanzee involve something more than a trial-and-error approach, such as that displayed in the frenetic activity of a rat in a maze. Faced with a problem, such as how to get hold of a banana beyond his immediate reach, the ape will, after his initial attempt has failed, commonly sit quite still in his enclosure, as though in a state of rapt contemplation. After a pause, his face will change expression, and only then does he move to put his new scheme into practice. For obvious reasons, Köhler called this an 'Aha!' experience. That there is relatively abstract, 'intelligent' thought involved is suggested by the sequence, frustration, puzzlement,

<sup>7</sup> Apart from Buytendijk, the names of Helmut Plessner and Adolf Portmann deserve special mention. These three are all subjects of illuminating chapters in Marjorie Grene, *Approaches to a Philosophical Biology*, New York: Basic Books 1968. <sup>8</sup> Dunlop's translation.

consideration, insight, renewed endeavour, which is evident from the chimpanzee's behaviour. If, as Scheler thought, Köhler's reading of the evidence is correct, then intelligence, in the sense of thought 'rationally' applied to the solution of a practical problem and leading to a novel approach, is not the prerogative of man alone. To be sure, the range of human intelligent activity is greater than that of the ape, and the type of thinking involved is more complex and abstract; but in so far as action is directed towards practical problems, the difference is only one of degree. No chimpanzee could calculate how one might build the dome of St Peter's Cathedral, nor would such a problem occur to him, for the very idea of a cathedral, a structure designed not to shelter the organic body from the elements but to testify to the glory of God, is utterly inexplicable in terms of the practical problems of a solely organic being. A chimpanzee understands well enough the significance of a shelter, but only man builds temples.

Here, for Scheler, was the crux of the problem. If certain other animals possess intelligence, what, if anything, sets man apart? The answer he gives is 'spirit'. Spirit is a principle of activity quite distinct from the drives of organic life which find expression in the practical problems of coping with the environment. A spiritual being is one capable of saying 'No' to his environment and even to life itself. 'A "spiritual" being', he writes,

is therefore no longer in bondage to its drives and its environment, but 'free of its environment', and as we shall call it 'open to the world'....Such a being has the power to 'objectify' the 'resistance' and reaction centres of his environment, which are all the animal possesses...he can also grasp the nature (*Sosein*) of these objects themselves in independence of the limitations imposed on this world of objects and its accessibility by the system of vital drives and the screen extended in front of it by the sense organs and their functions.<sup>9</sup>

The implications of this are enormous and ought to be made explicit. The most important of these implications lie in the notion of man as a uniquely 'world-open' being - a notion that was to be taken up with varying emphasis by the major figures of post-Schelerian philosophical anthropology. Animals inhabit an 'environment' whose perceived content, as the biologist Jakob von Uexküll showed, is indissolubly linked to the vital needs of the organism.<sup>10</sup> My cats can sleep through a recorded performance of Handel's *Fireworks Music* which would keep my neighbours awake, and yet the cats stir at a rustling sound that even an insomniac would not notice. My neighbours have no more 'interest' in Handel than my cats do, but within the range of frequency to which the human

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.      <sup>10</sup> Von Uexküll's experimental work on animal perception exerted a considerable influence on the development of a scientific basis for philosophical anthropology. Among his students was Konrad Lorenz.

ear is organically attuned the objective level of noise, regardless of its significance, is an object of human attention. Man, Scheler remarks, is uniquely open to biologically irrelevant and even harmful stimuli. Man inhabits not an environment exclusively structured by the senses in accord with the needs of the organism, but a world of objects - hence the phenomenon of human self-consciousness. In knowing the world as a world of objects, man understands himself as one element among others - experienced in unique fashion for sure and even an object of a unique type, but an element in the objective picture nonetheless. The self-conscious character of human subjectivity is, we may say, a function of the uniquely objective nature of human perception. By 'objective', I do not mean disinterested or unprejudiced - prejudice or prejudgement before all the facts of this situation are known is, as Hans-Georg Gadamer shows, a necessary feature of judgement itself<sup>11</sup> - but simply a perception of things as objects commanding attention regardless of the short- or long-term interests of the organism. It is within this wider field of 'knowledge' that the needs of the human organism appear as problems, not of pure theory, but of practice.

From this objectification of the human environment as a 'world' arises the problem of metaphysics. Animals cannot make their bodies and movements objects for themselves. Hence they have no sense of the objectivity of space and their place within it. Man, in contrast,

learns to reckon ever more comprehensively with his own contingent place in the universe, with his own self and his entire physical and psychical apparatus, as with something completely foreign to him, something that stands in relation of strict causality with other things.

Here we see the Kantian influence on Scheler emerging, an influence which becomes more explicit with what follows. In rising above his nature as an organism, man makes everything, including himself, an object of knowledge from, as it were, beyond the world of space and time.

But the centre, whence Man performs the acts of objectification of his body and soul, and makes the world in its fullness of space and time into an object - this centre cannot itself be a 'part' of this world, cannot possess a definite location in space and time: it can only be situated in the highest ground of being itself.<sup>12</sup>

The echoes of Kant are unmistakable, but if the argument is Kantian, Scheler is using it in very un-Kantian, metaphysical, way. While Kant and his successors had typically developed it in the

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<sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (transl. William Glen-Doppel), London: Sheed Ward 1975, pp. 235ff. <sup>12</sup> Scheler, op.cit.

direction of an epistemology which conceives the 'phenomenal' world - the world as it appears to consciousness - as inevitably structured by categories primordially pertaining to consciousness, Scheler stresses what he sees as its metaphysical significance. He conceives the spiritual centre, which man discovers within himself as something apart from the spatio-temporal world of nature, as the realization in the world of an aspect of the original Ground of Being. Knowing itself to be apart from the world, spirit discovers itself to be directly related to the transcendent reality which founds the very possibility of existence. This position is closer to Hegel than to Kant, but once separated from Scheler's pan-psychic vision of the world process in terms of the progressive interpenetration of spirit and drive, the Schelerian concept of spirit in man as oriented to a world-transcendent reality, of which it is simply the worldly manifestation, brings us close to the claims made by both Platonism and Biblical revelation: according to both of these, divine, world-transcendent truth makes itself directly known to the human seeker, the prophet of the philosopher who rises above earthly concerns to the encounter with God.

To pursue this line of enquiry would take us far from our present concerns, though it is, as developed by Eric Voegelin in particular, an important part of the Schelerian heritage.<sup>13</sup> For our purposes, it is enough to note that Scheler establishes the distinction between the animal's 'environment' and the objective 'world' of human experience, with reference to detailed scientific studies of the limits of animal perception; and that, once this distinction is accepted, it is easy to understand why man's world, not limited to the pursuit of the organic imperatives which are still the precondition of the organism's survival, is experienced as a field of open and estimable possibilities for action. We do not have to accept that any metaphysical or religious explanation of this situation can be found in order to understand why it is that man's discovery of his contingency to the world as a whole, and the finitude of his power to control that world, gives rise to the metaphysical and religious quest. Social anthropology can attest to the variety of forms this takes and to its universality; but it takes a philosophical anthropology to explain why it is there at all and why, in contradistinction to many other universal features of human life, it is unique to our species.

If we want to see what happens when the metaphysical element is expunged from philosophical anthropology, we cannot do better than turn to the work of Gehlen. Gehlen rejects Scheler's theory of spirit as an otherworldly element that enters existence through man's unique form of being; but he does not abandon the position that man's is, indeed, a qualitatively distinct form of life. From Scheler he retains the view that the form of human existence

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<sup>13</sup> See Eric Voegelin, *Order and History* (Vols. 1-4), Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1955-74. For a comparison of the implications of this development with Gehlen's theory, see my forthcoming book *Political Order: An Essay in Philosophical Anthropology*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press 1986; the present article draws on Ch.4 of that work especially.

can best be understood by approaching it through comparison with the life forms of other animals; and that the picture that emerges is of man as a uniquely world-open being. As Ludwig Landgrebe puts it, Gehlen

takes as the guiding principle of his thesis the supposition that man must not be understood with a view to what he has in common with animals, and some subsequently super-added factor, but that all the factors which are efficaciously active in man, beginning with the lowest purely organic ones, must from the outset be grasped in their specific significance.<sup>14</sup>

That is, the special significance they have for the human species.

Man is not comprehensible as one among the animals; not even one to whom a higher, metaphysically distinct element of spirit has mysteriously been added. He is quite simply a unique type of natural being whose relationship to the world on which his survival depends is utterly different from that subsisting between the animal and its environment. Here, as in Scheler, the specific difference of man is perceived as one of kind and not of degree; and, Gehlen avers, no feature of man's being can be understood unless it is comprehended as a particular functional part in a whole unique structure of organic existence. Human existence differs from that of the animal almost as much as animal existence differs from that of the plant. Indeed, between man and animal there is an increase in freedom of relationship to the world which is, if anything, greater than that between the mobile self directing animal and the plant, whose movements (if any) are totally subject to forces outside its control. Even the organic processes and cognitive operations common to man and animal alike are, according to Gehlen, misunderstood unless they are conceived as elements within a quite distinct form of life. The 'same' activity has a totally different significance when performed by man and by animal. Landgrebe calls Gehlen's 'the perfected biological approach' to philosophical anthropology. And so it is. But if this suggests that what we are discussing is any variety of biological determinism, at least as this is usually understood, the imputation is quite mistaken. Biology 'determines' the form of human existence negatively and not positively - by its failure to provide solutions to the problems of the species and in no other way.

Under the influence of evolutionism, naturalistic anthropologies prior to Gehlen's had tended to minimize the differences between human and animal life. Against this trend, Gehlen insists that it is precisely the equation of man with animal that prevents us from achieving a biological understanding of what is specifically human. The biology to which he appeals is what he calls 'anthropobiology', i.e. an analysis of organic processes in terms of the functions they fill or fail to fill in the context of the

<sup>14</sup> Ludwig Landgrebe, *Major Problems in Contemporary European Philosophy* (transl. K.R. Reinhardt), New York: Ungar 1966, p.22.

specific totality of human existence - a form of life which not only could not be derived from the possibilities of animal existence, but which the imperative preconditions of animal survival would seem to make impossible.

There is some analogy between Gehlen's approach and that of the *Gestalt* psychologists, among whom Köhler is one of the most prominent. Like them, Gehlen argues that experience - even that of human existence as a distinct life form - cannot be adequately understood as merely the sum of its analytically separable parts. *Gestalt* psychologists argue that human experience is not, as behaviourism supposes, a succession of discrete 'sensations' along a single time axis. In men as well as animals, the central nervous system performs a primordial synthetic function, causing the events of the world, and even the world itself, to be apprehended as already constituted 'wholes'. Neither we nor the animals add sensations together to form 'experience'. The sensations, which behaviourists and modern post-lockean empiricists in general regard as the primary building blocks of experience, are real enough; but they enter the reality of the subject only so far as they are experienced as significant elements within a formed picture of the way things seem to be. In other words, the significance of an event is inseparable from its context and from the subjectively constituted form in which it is apprehended. The patterns of experience precede the moments that bear them out.

The *Gestalt* that concerns Gehlen is the form of human life as a whole. An actually existing life form, such as man's, is only partially intelligible in terms of its evolutionary origins. To grasp its own original features, i.e. those whose origins lie in its distinctive formal properties, it must be understood as a totality in which the analytically separable elements stand as functioning parts of a whole capable of maintaining itself in the world. Seen in this way, Gehlen argues, human existence stands out as utterly distinct from any other form of life. While animal and plant life are characterized by the adaptation of the species to its environment, in man both organic adaptation and fixed environment are notable by their absence. In comparison with non-human animals man appears, as Herder put it two hundred years ago, a 'deficient' being, lacking in both instinctual guidance and the sort of bodily equipment and capabilities that would, by themselves, ensure survival.

This very lack of adaptation is man's mark of distinction.

All human functions, such as sensation, feeling, perception, language, derive from this their specific meaning, a meaning and a significance which is not comparable with the role they play in animal life. These functions are not a simple actualization of a prior adaptation to a given environment...They are functions on which a living being which does not enjoy, in an originary manner, a firm correlation of environment and organic function, must of necessity depend. They must therefore be understood as the 'self-activated performance by virtue of which man transforms the privative existential conditions of an

underprivileged being into the chances of his survival.' Man, by virtue of his nature, must of necessity be an active being, and the quintessence and sum total of that nature which he transforms by his action into that which serves life, is the world of culture and civilization (*Der Mensch*, pp.25ff.)

But in order to be able to act, man stands in need not only of a vista of possibilities but, in addition, of an actual independence of direct impulses; in short, the satisfaction of his needs and wants must be inhibited to some extent rather than being immediately fulfilled. Whereas in the animal sensation and reaction are directly interrelated, man owns the possibility of traversing the world in non-compulsive sensations (*triebfreien Empfindungen*) and of thus gaining a perspective of 'world over man'. It is this capability of 'retaining and restraining impulses' which brings to light man's 'inwardness'. All the sensori-motorial performances are not only carried out mechanically but with a self-awareness which moves them into the realm of cognition and makes them subject to control. Man must become conscious of himself in order to be able to survive as a human being. 'He must acquire knowledge in order to become active; he must be active in order to stay alive tomorrow.' (*Der Mensch*, p.40).<sup>15</sup>

In this argument from biological deficiency lies the source of Gehlen's influential theory of institutions - a theory which he developed most fully in *Urmensch und Spätkultur* (1956) and which has, through the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, even penetrated the world of English and American sociology. In brief, what Gehlen claims is that institutions are the human, cultural substitute for the absent, behavioural guidance of instinct. This perspective on the anthropological roots of institutionalization provides, like Scheler's analysis of the roots of man's religious quest, an instance of the way in which philosophical anthropology is able to explain a feature of human existence, diverse and yet universal, whose diversity and universality social anthropology can only chronicle.<sup>16</sup>

By appeal to the 'anthropobiological' factor of organic deficiency in combination with cultural creativity - a combination difficult to explain in evolutionary terms but unmistakable in a morphology of life forms - Gehlen believed that he had found a way round what he saw as the insuperable difficulties of Scheler's metaphysical dualism. That his achievement in clarifying certain distinctive features of human life in these terms was considerable is hardly to be denied. There are, however, certain problems in-

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.23.

<sup>16</sup> See my article 'Politics, Nature and Freedom: On the Natural Foundations of the Political Condition', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. XV, no.3 (October 1984), pp. 286-300. This is a version of the third chapter of my *Political Order* (see footnote 13).

herent in such an approach - problems that emerge most clearly when Gehlen's anthropology is looked at in the light of Scheler's own survey of contemporary views of human nature.

In 'Man and History', Scheler distinguishes five separate 'fundamental ideas of man' which exerted an influence on his contemporaries. Each represents a distinct anthropological image, from whose assumptions fundamentally different ideas of the nature, structure and origin of man derive. The five are: the Christian doctrine of man as a divinely created but fallen and sinful being; the Greek view of man as uniquely rational being; the naturalistic anthropology which sees man as essentially *homo faber*, the maker and transformer of the world; the pan-Romantic or Dionysian view, which Scheler associates above all with the then influential views of Ludwig Klages, according to which man is a defective product of evolution, 'a complete deserter from life', alienated from nature by the very 'spirit' or 'mind' in which he takes such pride; and, finally, what Scheler calls the 'postulating atheism of seriousness and responsibility', most rigorously represented in Nicolai Hartmann's philosophy, which pictures man as the uniquely purposeful inhabitant of an otherwise mechanistic universe.

For the moment only the third and fourth positions need concern us. For Gehlen's anthropology is a synthesis between the naturalistic image of man the maker and the pessimistic vitalism of the 'Dionysian' view. It is worth quoting the paragraph in which Scheler identifies the root suppositions of the latter in order to bring out how fully they enter the premises of Gehlen's in some ways quite original anthropology. Theodor Lessing, whom Scheler calls the 'adroit publicist of this idea', encapsulated it in the formula 'Man is a species of predatory ape that gradually went mad with pride over its so-called "mind".'

The Dutch anatomist Louis Blok...more appropriately summed up the results of his investigation in this sentence: 'Man is an infantile ape with deranged secretions.' In a similar way, the Berlin physician Paul Alsberg claims to have discovered a 'principle of humanity' not concerned with morphological comparison in the 'principle of degenerating organic functions.' Strongly influenced by Schopenhauer, the argument runs like this: Man stands quite defenceless in his environment, altogether far less adapted to it than his closest animal relatives. Unable to further develop his organic functions, man has, therefore, developed a tendency to use as few organic functions as possible and to replace them by tools (language and conceptualization are judged to be 'immaterial tools') which make it unnecessary to develop and sharpen the sensory organs. According to this theory, intelligence is not an *a priori* spiritual power requiring this disuse and making it possible, but, rather, the result of the fundamental refusal to use these organic functions, indeed, one of the modes of Schopenhauer's 'negation of life by the will'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Scheler, *Philosophical Perspectives*, p.83.

Typically, as in Klages' own work, this line of thought places the principle of 'spirit' in radical opposition to the 'life force'. In this way, the spirit/life dualism, found in Scheler's metaphysics, is reformulated as a principle of contradiction running through the very form of human existence. While Scheler looked forward to an ever-increasing spiritualization of life, Klages taught that only a reawakening of the in-dwelling impulses of nature could save mankind from the spiritually induced atrophy of the life force. This idea became a major component in the anthropology of National Socialism, with its persistent appeal to a renewed unity of 'blood and soil', recurrent symbols evoking respectively the inner and outer aspects of a single principle of life whose political expression would be the biologically based, racial community.

Gehlen's argument apparently precludes this position. By adhering with exemplary rigour to the consequences of regarding man as an organically deficient being, he rules out the possibility of falling back on the 'life force' as a solution to the problems of existence. At the same time, his anthropology remains significantly bound by the limits of the 'Dionysian' premise. Thus in a roundabout way he confirms the practical implications of Klages' cult of life, even while denying the possibility of depending on the forces to which Klages himself appeals.

From the natural deficiencies of man, Gehlen deduces not the dualistic opposition of life and spirit, but the necessity of a consciously formed cultural order embodied in limiting, authoritative institutions. The inventiveness of human consciousness and the order of culture deriving from it are anthropological necessities; and Gehlen revealingly describes consciousness as 'the auxiliary means of the organic process' which, in man at least, is otherwise fatally defective. To Klages he replies that we cannot fall back on what is no longer effectively present in the human constitution. In place of the absent order of instinctual regulation, man must regulate his life by creating institutions. Lacking the natural endowment that would assure survival, he must equip himself with tools and weapons such as only conscious intelligence could devise.

A certain separation from nature is man's fate, for only in standing back from his immediate environment can he perceive it as an open world of objectively estimable possibilities. This is in turn the precondition for the transformative action on which human survival depends. Objectification of the environment, a function of human consciousness, permits the achievement of a humanly habitable world of culture. And culture is the only nature in which man can exist.

Thus starting from premises identical with those of Klages and the 'back to nature' school, Gehlen arrives at the position he was later to formulate in the anti-Rousseauistic slogan 'back to culture'. The contrast here is apparent, but when we ask what is its implication for human action, it begins to disappear. The institutionalized world of culture is, as Gehlen describes it, a product of self-conscious, intelligent, transformative activity.

As such, it stands opposed to the human impossibility of raw nature - the vitalistic utopia of 'blood and soil'. But culture is also defined as an organic necessity for the existence of a particular form of life. True, it is formed by consciously directed activity; but consciousness is only the auxiliary function of an otherwise deficient organism. The human organism may be peculiar, but it is not utterly exceptional. In particular, it is no exception to the general rule that organisms are oriented to their own survival. If, as Gehlen insists, consciousness is an 'auxiliary means of the organic process', then its purposes are governed by the single imperative of assuring organic survival. Culture is the human form of nature in the quite specific sense that it is through cultural means - tools, weapons, institutions - that men achieve their purely natural ends. As much as for any more simplistic naturalism, the struggle for survival is the ultimate datum of Gehlen's anthropology. Within this scheme of things there can be no valid criterion of right or wrong beyond the momentary requirements of the struggle.

Influenced by von Uexküll, according to whom there is a strict correspondence between the life requirements of a species and the way it experiences its surroundings, but aware with Scheler of the peculiar openness of human perception, Gehlen maintains that man's consciousness can illumine only as much as is needed for an improvement in the life chances of the species. To the extent that it seeks to rise above its auxiliary function or believes itself capable of grasping an ethical or religious truth that transcends and so relativises the struggle for survival, consciousness becomes, as Klages thought it always was, diseased.

Readers of Plato will find this argument uncomfortably familiar. It recalls the common position of the sophists, against whom Socrates is compelled to avow that there are properly human cares beyond mere organic survival and circumstances in which it is better to choose to die. In Europe in 1940 (when Gehlen's book appeared), to endorse one position rather than the other was to make a political choice of fateful proportions. Today, the choice may seem less urgent, but the issues involved remain unchanged. No one should imagine that they are easy, but an argument which makes ethical decision subservient to organic imperatives cannot pass unchallenged. If, at the end of the day, we do not accept such an argument, it must be in full awareness of what it implies.<sup>18</sup> Such a consideration falls beyond the scope of this article and, to conclude, I should like to return to the figure with whose words I began, Martin Heidegger, the most sympathetic and perceptive critic of Scheler's conception of philosophical anthropology and the inspiration for Ludwig Landgrebe's equally perceptive criticism of Gehlen's work.

In *Being and Time*,<sup>19</sup> Heidegger advances the view that human

<sup>18</sup> For an eloquent and searching discussion of the issues involved see Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (note 4, above).

<sup>19</sup>

Halle: Max Niemeyer 1927 [*Jahrbuch für Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Forschung*, Vol. VIII, ed. Edmund Husserl].

existence is fundamentally hermeneutic. By this, he means that man's being depends not on any given facts of life (beyond his awareness of his mortality), but on the interpretations he places on the world. Heidegger talks not of 'man' but of *dasein*, literally 'being-there'. *Dasein* is essentially the being whose mode of being is questionable to himself. Human finitude is characterised by what Heidegger calls man's being-toward-death, his consciousness of mortality, rather than in terms of the relationship subsisting between a certain identifiable type of being and the more or less manipulable things of the world. Seen in this way, the philosophical anthropologists' approach to man - through a comparative morphology of life forms and, especially in Gehlen's case, through the exaltation of the struggle for biological survival to the point at which it becomes the ultimate reference point for the understanding of human existence - is only one possible interpretation, and one which has quite specific roots in certain currents of nineteenth-century thought. Thus in Landgrebe's judgement, Gehlen's theory absolutizes a particular interpretation of what is significant for man and, in doing so, not only precludes the possibility of political and ethical judgement independent of biological imperatives, but is prevented from comprehending its own historically conditioned origin:

The interpretation of the force of conscious self-knowledge and self-understanding as a mere auxiliary function of some organic process is itself no more than an *interpretation*... which is posited by man in his striving to understand himself within a set of definite, already established historical conditions.<sup>20</sup>

From the standpoint of Scheler, it could be argued that what Gehlen's anthropology lacks is any reference to the spiritual dimension and the metaphysical issues which this opens up. The Heideggerian criticism is more radical and extends even to Scheler's own conceptions. What Landgrebe thinks is wrong with Gehlen's theory is not that an aspect of human experience is missing from the picture, but that the characteristic approach of philosophical anthropology, in seeking to ground itself in particular scientifically established facts, inevitably starts from a partial, taken-for-granted, interpretation of the nature of things.

Instead of interpreting the self-understanding of man as a function of the facticity of life regarded as an ultimate, [this] interpretation of human existence... must be understood as the function of a very specific manner of self-understanding... In his self-understanding man designs a blueprint... of what he can be and should be, and in doing so he reaches out beyond everything that he has been. It is precisely when the problems implicit in the anthropological approach are followed to their conclusions - as is...

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<sup>20</sup> Landgrebe, *op.cit.*, p.26.

done in exemplary fashion in Gehlen's treatise - that it becomes clearly evident why these problems are not and cannot be narrowly self-confined but point beyond themselves to a different plane...on which the approach to the phenomenon of man tries to derive its justification from the structure of human self-understanding.<sup>21</sup>

In citing Landgrebe at length, I am not endorsing Heidegger's critique of the philosophical anthropological project from the standpoint of a purely hermeneutic understanding of human existence - an approach which seems to me to underestimate the importance of the ontologically given conditions in which self-interpretation takes place. I wish merely to suggest that philosophical anthropology, as developed by Scheler and his successors, also has its limitations, and that these limitations have their source in a historical situation in which the findings of experimental science seemed to be the last refuge of certainty in a politically and religiously uncertain world.

With the development of quantum physics in the 1920s and the displacement of Newtonian cosmology by Einstein's theory of relativity, the field of science itself - including the life sciences to which philosophical anthropology appeals - came to be understood as a field of conflicting, more or less well corroborated interpretations. In this sense, the Heideggerian emphasis on the primacy of interpretation is both understandable and correct. The life process of man is, after all, in the last resort the history of man as a self-interpreting being. Only in this process is the available evidence of the nature of things constituted as science. This means that, on the one hand, consciousness must be recognized as something more than an auxiliary function of an unquestionably given life form; and, on the other, that the understanding of man and the order he creates and inhabits must focus on the historical process of self-interpretation, in whose imperfect life man builds his temporal refuge, as well as on the significance of his form of life as the best available scientific evidence shows it to be. The integration of all these aspects, metaphysical, historical, biological and hermeneutic, remains not the promise of philosophical anthropology, but its challenge and its hope, the perceptible and ever-open horizon of human self-understanding.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-7.