

Man, Meaning and Otherness. Study Perspectives on the Definition of Identity

The human species is the most versatile and adaptable amongst all those which inhabit the Earth. Not being limited to one single environment in particular, the species extends to extremely diverse geographical areas, from icy plains to deserts, from Amazonian forests to the Himalayan mountains. Wherever man has settled, he has initiated environmental transformation processes that have changed the original, natural conditions – radically, in many cases, with, for example, urbanisation. This phenomenon is made possible, amongst other factors, by man’s cognitive and behavioural plasticity; if, in their relationship with the environment and others of the same species, most animals follow a predetermined ethogram, (in other words, a repertory of species-specific behavioural patterns), man, on the other hand, is open to a wide spectrum of possible modes of action. Every human group, every culture, is therefore able to develop different ways of existing in the world, which are then handed down to subsequent generations and constitute the symbolic backbone of the community. Furthermore, when faced with problems extending to a wider area of action than in the past, cultures are able to innovate and interact, defining symbolic, political and pragmatic tools, even at global level, if necessary. On the other hand, history eloquently shows how the cognitive and behavioural plasticity of our species may also give rise to devastating conflicts between human groups or to environmental exploitation which affects the survival of other living species.

Right from the first glance – obviously just one of many possibilities – man is characterised as a being that is cultural by nature, a being that entrusts its material existence to the transmission and incessant redefinition of knowledge, practices and institutions. And the extent of this characterisation is not limited to defining man’s way of accessing environmental

resources, quite different from that which is prevalent in animals: culture is not merely material, nor is it only the institutionalisation of a relationship with the environment. In man, the capacity for symbolic processing also satisfies a need that is not linked to his physical survival: the need for meaning, to know who we are and where our place is in the world, thus giving a meaning to disturbing events such as childbirth, the changes linked to growth and aging, suffering, the death of our loved ones and the anticipation of our own. In every culture we therefore come across myths, rituals, knowledge systems, religious representations and forms of artistic expression that take on the definition of identity. For the human species, this process is every bit as inherent and unavoidable as the biological needs linked to material survival. As a long tradition of studies on anomie and anomic suicide clearly underlines, the inability to satisfy the need for meaning leads to psycho-social phenomena that are often intolerable: a widespread sense of emptiness, the perception of individual and political action being absurd, the feeling of incompatibility between public and private life. In the face of these possible scenarios, in certain authors (such as Arnold Gehlen, for example), the clarification of the identity sphere and the stabilisation of the disquieting plasticity of human inwardness seem to take priority among the tasks entrusted to culture. On the other hand, an equally long tradition of philosophical and psychological studies shows that in man, the need for meaning is accompanied by other original and unavoidable needs, such as, for example, the need for relationships and cooperation with our peers or the need for happiness and personal fulfilment.

It is against the backdrop of these anthropological-philosophical considerations that the Rosmini Studies journal and the “Antonio Rosmini” Centre for Studies and Research of Trento University have, over the past two years, promoted a research project dedicated to the theme of identity. This line of research started out with the scientific initiative “Human identity and android robotics. A series of seminars on human identity and its reflections.” The cycle of events, held between March and October 2018, started out from the premise that, to define and understand the identity of the human being, philosophical and scientific thinking has always made reference to that which humankind is not, to otherness, in its various interpretations. In different eras and cultures, the search for the meaning of one’s existence has taken concrete form from the comparison with animals, with the various representations of divinity and with the “savage” (known or narrated). Ever since the seventeenth century, the definition of identity has also mirrored the machine, from the automatons of Jacques de Vaucanson to the cyborgs and to modern day artificial intelligence. From an anthropological-philosophical point of view, even the possible degree of conciliation between self and the other has proved to

be very variable: we pass from the perception of an original identity with otherness itself (think of the ritual identification with the totemic animal) to the adoption of gradual development schemes (such as in Victorian anthropology, that distanced the otherness of the savage by placing him on the first step of a staircase leading straight to the European), to reach the contemporary symbolic worlds of cyborg and post-human thought, in which the idea of hybridisation, of symbolic or physical mingling between machine, man and animal, predominates. This mingling can be qualitatively very varied, and not only because of the different level of awareness of the subjects involved. If domestication of the dog by humans has changed both the man and the dog, the structural interaction between a human actor and a humanoid robot in a theatre play, or between a painter and a robot that can copy his most famous paintings perfectly, we find ourselves faced with a qualitatively new hybridisation and completely different problems.

In exploring this vast and diverse field of research, the Centre has adopted a spirit of ideal continuity with an openness that typifies Rosminian philosophy, also, indeed, above all, in the anthropological works. In this regard, it is difficult to underestimate the importance that scientific disciplines assume in the Rosminian *Antropologia al servizio della scienza morale*, (*Anthropology at the service of moral science*), from physiology to medicine, from biology to psychiatry. It is precisely from the contributions of these sciences that Rosmini identifies animality as an undeniable trait of human identity. The horizon of sensation and corporeity, combined with the call of the instinctual dimension, gives Rosminian anthropology a character of complexity and problematically unresolved unity that is not limited to the domain of the noble faculties of intellect and will. All this is legitimised by means of a wide interdisciplinary work that the Rovereto philosopher accomplishes using scientific sources to explain the complex status of identity of the human being. The fact that Rosmini was extraordinarily receptive to contemporary scientific acquisitions is also attested by numerous specialised studies, from the now classic collective volume edited by P.P. Ottonello, *Rosmini e l'enciclopedia delle scienze* (Olschki, Florence 1998), to contributions by G.L. Sanna, “*La corporeità in Rosmini tra storia della medicina e Teosofia*” (included in G. Picenardi's *Rosmini e la Teosofia. Dialogo tra i classici del pensiero sulle radici dell'essere*, Rosminian Editions, Stresa 2013) and by G. Bonvegna, “*Rosmini naturalista? Note sul ruolo delle scienze naturali nell'antropologia filosofica rosminiana*” (in the Neo-scholastic philosophy journal, I, 2013, pp. 131-150), to name just a few examples. This type of integrated work between anthropology and science is followed, in subsequent books, by a methodological approach that again combines

reflections of a philosophical nature with approaches from other disciplines: such is the case in *Del principio supremo della metodica*, where the object of investigation - rather than the educational methodology to be applied in childhood - is the child himself, described in his psychological development towards adulthood. It is precisely from the study of the nature of children - a sort of *ante litteram pedagogic anthropology* - that a key question emerges for identity processes: how the ego becomes consciousness? Rosmini is unable to give an answer to this enigma: the intuition of a distinction of processes and psychic elements internal to the human subject remains, and hence the awareness of a composite identity in man, which starts to develop right from our early years. Scientific contributions therefore provide valuable indications for the determination of an identity concept that remains problematically open in its thinking.

To give an idea of the fruitfulness of these lines of research, a collection of articles in *Focus*, issue no. 4 (2017) by Rosmini Studies also provide a contribution: in fact, from this point of view, the line of research dedicated to human identity shows strong traits of continuity with the Centre's previous project, dedicated to the investigation of the relationship between the thought of Roveretan philosopher and the contemporary scientific disciplines of his time. However, Rosmini does not limit his wealth of ideas in the link between anthropology and the sciences: it must be remembered that for him, man's nature manifests itself in a constitutive openness to Transcendence, which ultimately confers the full meaning of existence and human identity. Therefore, it is clear that even the vast field that we have set out to explore following the idea of identity requires an interdisciplinary approach, and, in fact, has been addressed with the help of philosophers of science, robotics and artificial intelligence scholars, experts of human-animal studies and animal ethics, sociologists and moral, theoretic and religious philosophers.

Amongst the many contributions stimulated by our course of study, two of the most convincing can be found in the *Focus* section of the current edition of Rosmini Studies. The first, *Uomini e meccanismi: dall'automa seicentesco alla cibernetica contemporanea*, by Edoardo Datteri (University of Milan Bicocca), is dedicated to the epistemological function that biomorphic automata - those automata, that is, that mimic the anatomical or behavioural characteristics of man or animals - played in the twentieth century in the processes of defining the living. The article succeeds in demonstrating, concretely and precisely, that the choice of

*an explanatory model is never neutral from a hermeneutical point of view – in the case in question, that the use of mechanical behavioural models risks favouring a mechanistic interpretation of the biological-theoretical concept of an organism and, in particular, of the perceptive and operative faculties of animals and humans. The second article, *Umano, postumano, umanoide*, by Roberto Marchesini (The Post-humanistic Philosophy Study Centre and the Institute of Zoo-anthropological Training) offers a broad reflection on contemporaneity, which is seen as a phase of radical transformation of the “symbolic management” of otherness. In Marchesini’s theoretic context, contemporaneity would see a long-term transition taking place from the era of humanism – in which the different forms of otherness would tend to be held at the very edge of anthropic identity, as external poles of its definition and instrumental to it – to the post-human age of conscious hybridisation, of structural, corporeal or imaginary interaction, between machine, man and animal. Both contributions highlight – from different perspectives – a phenomenon common to all the cultural processes of “dialectical definition” of human identity: one cannot relate to a pole of otherness without assuming, at various levels of awareness, certain fundamentals. In turn, this phenomenon refers to the sphere of elementary anthropology from which we started: only a plastic being can, in fact, integrate into his identity such diverse moments as the animal, the machine, the experience of the sacred and other forms of otherness. At the same time, this opens up other problems: is the technological research into humanoid robots moved only by plasticity and the need for a meaning for human intelligence? Or does technological enhancement sometimes become an end in itself, wound up in a self-referential logic? Or, in other cases, does it bend to market needs?*

The line of investigation that the Centre dedicated to human identity did not end in 2018, the year in which the contributions contained in this issue of Rosmini Studies appeared. It is, in fact, only a first step. Amongst the next initiatives, a new series of thematic seminars will return, starting in the autumn of 2019 and extending until the spring of 2020. Once again dedicated to the philosophical discourse on identity, the seminars will, however, have a different slant. They will, in fact, underline the oppositional aspect, the internal conflict of many processes of definition of long-term identity, so to speak. For example, on the palaeoanthropological level, the apparent identity unit of the genus homo will be seen as the outcome of a process of interaction and competition between different species, as shown by the most recent discoveries; on the genetic level, we will try to understand what the impact of contemporary genomic editing technologies might be, not only on the hereditary human inheritance, under-

stood in its concreteness, but also on the perception of the human being itself; in terms of gender dynamics, the predominance of the male paradigm in the definition of traditional identity will see modern and contemporary phenomena of feminine specificity and gender fluidity as a counterpoint, and so on. Once again, the challenge will be to move in this spectrum of problems with an open mind, with a view to a bringing together a comparison with various forms of philosophical and scientific reflection. In the upcoming editions of Rosmini Studies we will be dedicating space to this comparison, reporting on the problems that gradually emerge.