On the ludicrousness of humanism: the critique of human perfectibility in Pascal and Luther

Prof. Luiz Felipe Pondé[1]

Professor at the Program of Postgraduate Studies in Sciences of Religion and at the Department of Theology of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and Guest Professor at the Postgraduate Studies in Teaching of Health Sciences of The Paulista School of Medicine, Federal University of São Paulo

ABSTRACT

The text has three levels. On the first level, we follow the semantic construction of the philosophical concept of "humanism", from the artiens in the 13 th Century up to Pico de La Mirandola and his mysticism of "human nature dignity and sufficiency" in the Renaissance. On the second level, we examine Luther's and Pascal's criticism of "humanism", showing that human behavior gives no empirical support for such abstract mysticism. Last but not least, on a third level, we argue that the Christian critics of humanism seemed to be right in doubting the viability of such "ridiculous worship of human nature".

Keywords: Humanism; Perfectibility; Construction; Anti-Humanism; Pascal; Lutero; Renaissance; Pico de La Mirandola; Human Nature

---

[1] He is the author of O homem insuficiente: comentários de antropologia pascaliana [The insufficient man: comments on Pascal's anthropology] (São Paulo: Edusp, 2001), Crítica e profecia: filosofia da religião em Dostoievski [Criticism and prophecy: the philosophy of religion in Dostoevsky] (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2003), Conhecimento na desgraça: ensaio de epistemologia pascaliana [Knowledge in wretchedness: an essay on Pascal's epistemology] (São Paulo: Edusp, 2004) and Do pensamento no deserto: ensaios de filosofia, teologia e literatura [Thinking in the desert: essays on philosophy, theology and literature] (São Paulo: Edusp, forthcoming).

***

I have completed the *construction* of my burrow and it seems to be successful. All that can be seen from outside is a big hole; that, however, really leads nowhere; if you take a few steps you strike against natural firm rock. I can make no boast of having contrived this ruse intentionally; it is simply the *remains* of one of my many abortive building attempts, but finally it seemed to me advisable to leave this one hole without filling it in. True, some ruses are so subtle that they defeat themselves, I know that better than anyone, and it is certainly a risk to draw attention by this hole to the fact that there may be something in the vicinity worth inquiring into.

Franz Kafka. "The Burrow" in *The basic Kafka*.
New York: Pocket Book/Simon & Schuster, 1979. (Italics mine.)

The term "humanism" is widely used among us. We can hear it used by corporate pundits – "A more humane company!" – as well as in supposedly more critical environments – "A more humane society!", usually implying a less "techno-dependent" and more human-centered one, where a "human" would be, above all, a regulating and pseudo-Weberian "ideal type". Philosophy and its history are excluded from this debate (which is actually only commonsensical, even if taking place within the walls of the Academy), inasmuch as philosophy is only one of many professional activities and, within its asphyxiating field of action, one would be hard-pressed to find the function of correcting semantic or pragmatic usages (current philosophical practice is not characterized by the social exercise of "semantic awareness"). In other words, we professional philosophers should have no say in what humans understand as "humanism". Meanwhile, we are all, evidently, "humanists". As if rigor (the *hygiene* by which we recoil) and asphyxiation were twin noetic attitudes. When we examine the conceptual history of this term, we see that, while today it is part of the jargon of "human resources" and existential consultants, in the past it was the object of violent philosophical and theological debate – in fact, one of its most fundamental roots stems precisely from the collision between these two fields of knowledge.

The word "humanist" is not evident in itself; on the contrary, it is a clear-cut case of semantic and pragmatic instability. When we utter it, we are normally taken in by approximation and compromise. "Humanism", "humanist", "humanistic", "anti-humanism" bring to mind to controversies from a period usually known as Renaissance – even if, strictly speaking, it cannot be said that Renaissance authors used such terms in ways that would be evident to us today (if they used them at all). The philosophical and historical consistency of

these words[2] derives, above all, from polemics regarding "human nature" – a concept in unremitting decline with regard to its semantic and pragmatic stability in the human sciences and the focus of hostile controversies between socio-sympathizers and bio-sympathizers. As we will see, this is actually a debate on the consistency of the human will, that is, on its autonomy and validity. If this term demands a careful and obsessive archeology of the concept, its relationship and philosophical/historical implications with the modern *myth* of "Man" are plain enough: the myth of "humaneness" (an untimely *universal* that was offal of the nominalist razor) is a *construction* at the service of our "self-image" – or rather, pride. This suspicion is at the root of a "humanistic dogmatism" being refused by both the classicist Reformation and Jansenism (the latter taken as a Calvinism *manqué*).

I believe that the censure by Luther, the reformer, and Pascal, the Jansen, of the fledgling "humanism" of their time is useful to establish a dialogue with such *construction*. The preliminary vocabulary of these writers is derived from the Augustinian legacy of the theology of grace and from the internal struggles of a later "humanistic" Christianity. The *"disjunction"* of philosophy from its condition of theology's "servant", which began in 13th century Paris, is another important reference. The Renaissance (and, specifically, the expositions of Pico della Mirandola) is a third essential landmark in this process. To be sure, my intention here is not to embrace this discussion in its entirety, but simply to attempt to understand the focus of Luther's and Pascal's criticism to the myth of "human" sufficiency.

On Construction

> Inversely, we understand that man's efforts to know and elucidate, if based on human experience and on the data of philosophical research alone, find no confirmation of the doctrine of Man's "Fall". Even if philosophy's role is not that of opposing or combating theology, it must, nevertheless, set forth the distinctions between the philosophical issue of man's perfection and the theological assumptions regarding the correctitude and fall of our nature.
>
> FAYE, Emmanuel. *Philosophie et perfection de l'homme.* Paris: J. Vrin, 1998, p. 24.

The medieval (13th century) and Renaissance debate (as presented by Faye in his work on human nature's possible perfection) is particularly elucidative of this matter, inasmuch as it

---

2   F. J. Niethammer used the term "Humanismus" in 1808 to refer to a trend he deemed important in the study of languages. According to A. Campana (*The origin of the word "humanist',* J. Warburg, 1946, pp. 60-73), we find usages such as "Umanista" in 1538. But if we deliver ourselves from the term itself, we will find usages that sanction our interpretation of "humanism" – and its analogues – as an "ideal type of self-image'.

opposes two ideas that are usually assumed as implicated: theology's dogmatic assertion of human nature's inevitable corruption due to the Fall, on one hand, and philosophy's averment, based on the use of its peculiar instruments (namely, elucidative research and human experience, according to Faye), that no *empirical* data (italics mine) exist that necessarily deny the possibility of human perfectibility. According to Faye, philosophy's presumptive "possibility of perfection" is not hindered by any *a priori* theological appreciation that delegitimizes its consistency. Thus, by freeing itself from theological *negativity*, the philosophy of man finds breathing room in the possibility of redemptive *undefinableness*: the true gain here pertains not to a positive *empiricism* (the denial of the theological *a priori* does not imply the affirmation of any symmetrically opposed *a priori*), but only to an *ideal*. Indeed, there is no definitive evidence of the Fall, as there is no definitive evidence of human perfectibility. The liberation one "discovers" here pertains to the absence of any *supernatural* predetermination. It seems to me, however, that the concept of perfectibility requires a notion of process that implies the ability to self-overcome previously defined conditions as the metrics that legitimizes a *gain* in *perfection*: from caves to airplanes, for instance, or from human sacrifices to the democracy of snugly contented consumers. I would even say that, in this case, the "true advancement" of late medieval and Renaissance philosophy occurred with regard to a *falsely* necessary theological stewardship, not to a field of evidences that might provide legitimacy exempt from *dogmas* or *myths*. The indefiniteness of human nature, which is (supposedly) supported by *elucidative research* and *human experience*, disembogues in a *construction,* not on evidences that are symmetrically opposed to the *obscure* myth of the Fall. Let us examine some instances of this *construction*.

The fundamental reference of the aforementioned "disjunction" is a process that stretches from the *artiens* of Siger de Brabant in 13th century Paris to authors such as Pico della Mirandola in the 15th century or Charles de Bovelles in the early 16th century (and the Renaissance "humanists" in general), a long-winded encomium of the dignity of ("humanized") philosophy *per se*.

> There is, however, something that specifically characterizes the *artiens* philosophers of the 13th century: their asceticism and their absolute and exclusive high regard for intellectual life. […] In this regard, the philosophical current that would emerge in France in the 16th century will include a more comprehensive notion of Man's perfection and will prioritize the complete set of the virtualities of his nature, both corporal and spiritual.

> Emmanuel Faye. *Op. cit.,* p. 27.

The idea of the "virtualities of human nature" is central here; the same is true for the process of understanding the intellect as a faculty that does not require supernatural *content* for its fulfillment – the greatest virtue for the *artiens*. That is where idea of the *dignity* of a purely philosophical life finds its conceptual locus: dignity describes a virtue, not an evidence. The Parisian *artiens'* advocacy of the intellect will make way for a "more comprehensive notion of man's perfection" in the Renaissance, according to Faye. Above all, we can see that the *parti pris* of theologically predetermined *imperfection* is at the core of the philosophy/theology "disjunction". As part of this movement, the idea of the sufficiency (autonomy) of all the "natural virtualities of Man" will become enrooted. The "pessimism" of the Reformation will attack precisely this idea of excluding transcendental efficaciousness. A "more comprehensive notion of man's perfection" refers specifically to the corporal and spiritual "virtualities" in question. Thus, we see that what is usually called Renaissance "humanism" is a misnomer (at the very least, it is semantically polysemous): it refers here to the dethronement of the theology of the Fall as the determining hypothesis of philosophical anthropology – which, ideally, affirms the autonomy of this set of "virtualities". I do not believe it is feasible to oppose Yahwehian *mythology* to "humanistic" *empiria*.[3] From a strictly neopragmatic perspective, I would say it is *merely* a supposedly self-valuating redescription. Modern Augustinians would see here a very sophisticated development of the third concupiscence, pride. The foci of the discussion are the postulates of perfection and dignity, not any justifiable description. It is a moral, not conceptual/empirical "enunciation". If the theological myth is a ghost, the "human" cannot be otherwise.

> That is why I suggested abandoning an anachronistic and troublesome term, focusing the appropriate terminology of the time, and studying the way the *dignitas hominis* was conceived throughout history. […] If we indeed pay no heed to each author in particular and, instead, consider the issue of man's dignity generally, we find that this notion […] is historically always subservient to a greater motif, namely, free will. There is nothing here that is uniquely Renaissance.
>
> Emmanuel Faye. *Op. cit.,* p. 31.

Thus, the *topos* of *dignitas hominis* is, in reality, a discussion regarding free will. Medieval scholars – Duns Scotus, Bernard de Clairvaux, and Richard de Saint Victor, among others – already conceived this human dignity, but it was still necessarily conditioned by man's *capax Dei*; in other words, it was *supernaturally* determined. In theoretical (i.e., moral and ontological) terms, a typical Renaissance scholar *differs* from his medieval counterpart for

---

3   In Freudian terms, we might say this is precisely the case where the patient – "the men and women" – *re-signify* their self-image and choose a less self-deprecating version. This, however, is only a metaphor.

refusing to discuss the corruption of free will, as exemplified by the *torments* of *De miseria humanae conditionis* (Lotario di Segni, later pope Innocent III), as happened with Pico and other authors.[4] This is the essential trait of the "humanistic" mythology: the identification of a *virtual* free will with the actual human possibility of being free from any *a priori* moral dysfunction. There is clearly a theological argument at stake here (in the medieval authors, that is); but I do not find it equally evident that by abandoning an explicitly theological vocabulary the issue is resolved *in favor of* the "humanistic" mythology. In other words, an empirical appreciation does not necessarily justify the somewhat *naive* Renaissance position.

The argument Renaissance[5] scholars does not (or, at least, not evidently) propound an *a priori* perfection in human nature – i.e., man's dignity as a being capable of sufficient free will –, but rather that there is an infinite potentiality (virtuality) that is not predetermined by any necessary restrictive inability. This restriction *was* the argument of corruption.

> The true distinction, by the way, resides in the fact that man has no fixed properties but has the power to share the properties of every other being, according to his own free choice.
>
> Paul Oskar Kristeller. "Introduction to Oration on the Dignity of Man" in *The Renaissance philosophy of man,* Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, John Herman Randall, Jr. (orgs.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956, p. 218.

According to Kristeller, it is precisely this *emancipation* from the medieval hierarchy of beings that sets Man *free* from the property-affixing restriction inherent in the idea of conditioning sin. Let us listen to the words of Pico himself:

> He made man a creature of indeterminate and indifferent nature. […] The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will […] trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. […] Man, to whom it is granted to have what he chooses, to be what he wills to be!
>
> Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man.*

The notion of undefinableness actually gives support to the idea of unconditional infinite power. The arguments of the *Oration* have a marked tendency to deny the very notion of *human condition* (specifically, the restrictive conditioning of theology): Man's *minimal* condition is to

---

4 Cf. Emmanuel Faye. *Op. cit.*, p. 32.

5 Hereafter, whenever I mention the "Renaissance position", I am referring specifically to Pico della Mirandola's argument regarding man's indeterminate nature.

be free for anything. Pico says, "It will be in [his] power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; [he] will be able, through [his] own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine." Man's choice is *Cause*. There is a clear theological bias in Pico's discussion and vocabulary. He describes a *blessing* that Man has received, a blessing characterized by indefinite free will. Pico's "humanist" philosophy is a "theology" with no conditioning restriction.[6] In this sense, the "disjunction" mentioned above once again precludes any corruption of the free will and any transcendental effect upon all that is "human". It is, therefore, a controversy within a deifying concept of Man, but severed from the *infelicitous* argument of his *misery*. The hypothetic undefinableness is the core of *dignitas hominis*, the nucleus of the idea that human nature is sufficient in and by itself, and that finds fulfillment in the *production* of culture.

As presented in the *Oration*, the idea of undefinableness or indeterminateness is essential to understand the transition from a purely *historical* concept of the "humanistic" position in the Renaissance to a *philosophical* discussion. However, the strictly *historical* definition (namely, that "humanism" is actually classical scholarship redeeming the non-Christian, Greco-Roman tradition) will certainly play an important role in the mystical construction[7] of "humaneness': indeterminateness, dignity, nobleness, nature/nurture, and sufficiency.

> What is, exactly, the notion that led to the transition from historical (i.e., classical) meanings to philosophical ones? From historically determined humanists to humanism as a philosophical category? […] Humanism is what might be called "mysticism of human nobleness [of character]". […] It is precisely the same mysticism of human greatness that nurtures the Renaissance man and the humanist. […] We could define humanism as an ethics of human nobleness.
>
> Henri Gouhier, *L'anti-humanisme au XVIIeme siècle.* Paris: J Vrin, 1987, p. 17.

---

[6] I do not wish to specifically invalidate how Faye views on how philosophy sets itself free from theology, nor can I dedicate myself to this question here. But it should be noted that this liberation, at least as it relates do Pico's work (and his concept of undefinableness, by asserting Man's free will and deducing his noble dignity, seems essential to the construction of the "humanistic myth"), occurs within a religious milieu: there is merely a change of focus, from an oration to Him who can effectively condition human free will to an oration in homage to human dignity.

[7] In the words of Kristeller and Randall: "Even if 'humanities' is merely another name for these specific studies, the choice of the term implies a very characteristic appeal to the cultural and educational ideal of the humanists: the cultivation of the classics (or 'humanities') is justified because they are well-suited to educate and develop a desirable type of human being. The classics represent the highest level of human achievement and, thus, should be an essential concern of every man." Paul Oskar Kristeller & John Herman Randall, Jr. *Introduction to the Renaissance philosophy of man*, p. 4. The locus of culture (as the topos that defines Man's natural being) is essential here because of the historical tendency to define man as a *cultural animal* rather than a *supernatural animal*. The relationship of identity (being both a *strictly natural* animal and a *cultural animal*) is of great importance, but unfortunately I cannot linger specifically on it at this moment.

Quoting Augustin Renaudet[8], Gouhier lists the definitions that have precisely to do with the *ideal* character of *humanistic* dignity. Humanism is an ethics and, if the theological argument of corruption proves itself consistent in any way, this ethics will reveal itself as *phantasmal*. If there are no empirical restrictions to breaking with the *somber* hypothesis of the Fall, there is also no empirical restriction to suspecting the *phantasmal* nature of *humanistic* dignity. This would mean that Augustine's distrust of the intellectual *drive* underlies "humanism" (with clearly critical effects): the phantom ethics is well-suited for the anthropological lie Man tells about himself, nurturing the very same dysfunction (structural hubris, the love for the nothingness of the creature) that it denies by excluding theology's *somber* argument. However, before embarking on the negativity of the *construction*, let us pay attention to this last and long quote, which I believe accurately summarizes the core of the "humanistic" argument, while shedding light on modern Augustinian *anti-humanistic* critique.

> […] the blurry idea of "grandeur" is to be replaced by the distinct idea of "sufficiency", allowing us to recognize humanism by three precise characteristics:
> 1. Humanism means a certain sufficiency in man. […] Man *is capable of anything* because of the only forces that make him a man, reason and will specifically.
> 2. What does "by the only forces that make him a man"? It is by no means an accident that the notion of nature has always been linked to that of humanism. […] The sufficiency that humanism acknowledges is, in fact, that of nature itself. And what is nature sufficient for? It refers to nature being able to find fulfillment: thus, its sufficiency means that, at least within certain limits, nature is capable of recognizing and achieving what is good. In other words, the notion implies a relative goodness of nature.
> 3. In man, nature has the particularity of finding fulfillment in and through culture. It is by no means an accident that the notion of culture has always been linked to that of humanism. This can be seen today when reference is made to "modern humanism" or "technical humanism". […]
>
> Sufficiency, nature, and culture are three complementary terms.[9] […] Whenever they are not present, we can rightly speak of anti-humanism.
>
> Henri Gouhier. *Op. cit.,* p. 20-21.

Thus, the relationship with culture is at the very root of the cult of *a priori* human dignity. The naive character of this devotion is evident, for isn't history a pageant of horrors? What is determinedly *beautiful* in "culture"? We can easily fall into denial regarding this most reasonable of evidences: we need only to nurture that what must never be offended (namely, our

---

8   See Augustin Renaudet. *Autour d'une définition de l'humanisme*, Bibliothèque Française de l'humanisme, Travaux T. VI, 1945.

9   See note 6 above. The third point is precisely the one that would refer to the "continuity" of nature being manifested in the course of the history of culture. The classics, then, would represent this period prior to the infelicitous incursion of a discourse that clashed with and denied the possibility of autonomy in human nature.

ontological self-esteem, our haughtiness), as modern reformers would say. I believe this *mythic* atmosphere remains among us; we have only rejected its pragmatic and semantic consciousness.

> The glorification of man was one of the favorite themes in early Renaissance literature. In the 16th century, this provoked a violent reaction. The emphasis of the theology of the first protestant Reformation on total depravity may have been a response to the exacerbated praise of common man found in the humanistic literature of their time.

<div align="right">Paul Oskar Kristeller & John Herman Randall. Op. cit., p. 19.</div>

Immediately below, Kristeller and Randall state that underlying the violent reactions against the inordinateness of *humanistic orations* was the Augustinian concept of Man. And then they refer to Montaigne, this rather *non*-humanistic Renaissance man. However, according to these scholars, the distinguishing feature of Montaigne's critique is that it "detheologizes" or "humanizes" Augustine's notion – in other words, that it does not resort to dogmatic beliefs (a redundancy?). It is interesting to bear in mind that when dealing with Montaigne we are in skeptical terrain. The Augustinian concept, if deprived of its "redeeming" theological component, necessarily oozes into skeptical criticism and aggressive anthropological pessimism – traits of a noetic attitude that, saturated by *realism* (in opposition to idealism), seems smothering. Arguments with skeptical overtones usually reveal themselves to be empirically powerful.

On Denial

> Truth is not premier. It is of the order of disillusionment, it is always a demystification that presumes the mystification that founds it and that it denudes. Every society survives through the self-mystification of its mechanisms, in order to assure its own perpetuation, and through the desire to conceal its extraordinarily self-destructive character.

<div align="right">Pascal Quignard, "Traité sur Esprit" in La fausseté des vertus humaines de Jacques Esprit. Paris: Aubier, 1996, p. 65.</div>

The process of attaining "truth", as described by this contemporary Jansenist (Quignard) commenting on another Jansenist (Esprit) from the 17th century, leans heavily on a typical Augustinian reaction to the Renaissance's reverence of human sufficiency: disillusion as epistemic transcendence. But what, specifically, is the underlying delusion? The self-righteous and prideful *construction*. In the field of philosophical-theological anthropology, the root of this reaction lies in Augustine's reflection on the free will. It is not a matter of denying the

possibility of associating the term "dignity" to human beings in any circumstance, but rather of questioning the consistency of the *oration* to the free will – that is, the worship of a self-evident moral autonomy. Philosophically, the conceptual *remains* of this critique is the idea of Man's cognitive and volitional dysfunction.

> What have you that you have not received? And, if received, why do you glorify yourself as if you had not received it as a gift? That is: "Why glorify yourself as if you had received from yourself a gift that, had you not received, you would not have by yourself?" […] It is better to have less than what we asked God for than to have more than what we attribute ourselves.

> Augustine. "Epistula ad hilarium syracusanum" in *La crise Pélagienne* I.
> Paris: IEA, 1994, pp. 50-51, (10).

Furthermore:

> But that free will, whereby man corrupted his own self, was sufficient for his passing into sin; but to return to righteousness, he has need of a Physician, since he is out of health. […] He goes further, and in the most open manner gainsays the grace of Christ whereby we are justified, by insisting on the sufficiency of nature to work righteousness, provided only the will be present. […] This, a prideful spirit cannot understand.

> Augustine. *De natura et gratia.* XXIII, XXV.

Augustine attacks the idea of sufficiency advocated by Pelagius because he deems it pride. Moreover, this very same pride is raised to the category of a *negative* epistemic transcendental, rendering the understanding of his criticism unfeasible: an example of the spirit's (i.e., the intellect's) submission to a haughty will. Albeit the term is anachronous – it was even in the Renaissance! –, Pelagian sufficiency is a conception of human nature that is very close to the *humanistic oration*. Augustine denies such sufficiency and maintains the strict necessity of effective grace and contingent grace (which are not liable to the rational economy of human merits) for the free will to unburden itself from the gravity of sin. Throughout his argumentation,[10] Augustine describes the empirical *miseries* of Man as proof that the *hypothesis* of the Fall does a better job of explaining the human condition than the vain attempt of sustaining a *possible* moral autonomy (even, as Augustine himself acknowledges, if the latter is in certain measure justified by Pelagius' disgust with the Christian's moral laxism that blamed sin for the deplorable state of human condition, in a kind of *perverse* Manichaeism). Augustine

---

[10] Other works that compose the two volumes of *La crise Palegienne* published by the Institut d'Études Agustiniennes de Paris are: De Perfectione Iustitiae Hominis, De gratia christi et De peccato originali libri II, and De natura et origine animae libri IV.

opposes the *reality* of an empirical condition (human nature seems bemired in a monotonous repetition of conditioned acts of love for the creature, beginning with Man's love *for himself*) to the *possibility* of deconditioning brought about by free will. Augustine sees this *conditioning* as the corruption of sin, as described by theology. Pelagius, in turn, contends that this *condition* is arguably mere existential rhetoric (in contemporary terms) for moral sloth. Augustine recognizes that worthiness of struggling against sloth, but stresses that we must not attempt to resolve this sloth *falsely*: the Pelagian solution is a prescription for Stoicism-induced human pride, for acknowledging a *dignity* in human freedom – that is, it displaces the rhetoric of blamelessness by advocating that pride is a *builder of the personality* (once again, contemporary lexicon, of course). This kernel of themes (false sufficiency, error, vanity,[11] etc.) will be retrieved by the Reformation and by Jansenism in general, notwithstanding the important differences between the likes of Luther and Pascal.

> Now this book ought really to have a title [to indicate] that it was written against the free will. For the entire book tends to show that the counsels, plans, and undertakings of men are all in vain and fruitless, and that they always have a different outcome from that which we will and purpose. Thus, Solomon would teach us to wait in confident trust and to let God alone do everything, *above and against and without* our knowledge and counsel.
>
> Martin Luther. "Preface to Solomon's Ecclesiastes" (1524), in *Faith and freedom: an invitation to the writings of Martin Luther.* John F. Thornton & Susan B. Varenne (orgs.) New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, Random House, 2002, p. 68. (Italics mine.)

For Luther, the Ecclesiastes[12] should not be understood as a disqualification of Creation itself, but as a critique of the idea of Man as rational and moral *Cause*. The reformer sees as wisdom the acknowledgement that God does not take into account what we assume to know in order to *conduct* His Creation. There is here a somewhat ruthless exclusion of what we might call the *dynamics* of Man and the core of this exclusion is the free will – because for Luther, as we will see below, the human situation no different from what Augustine described. This preface was written at the same time (1524) that Erasmus of Rotterdam prepared his *De libero arbitrium* (published in Basle) and against whom Luther would write his *The bondage of the*

---

[11] It is extremely important to keep in mind how the meanings of "ephemeral", "vain" and "conceited" overlap in this discussion of pride, particularly when we see how highly Luther thinks of Ecclesiastes as the quintessential book written against the illusion of an autonomous free will.

[12] The Qohelet is often described as the Skeptic of the Hebrew Bible, that is, as book of wisdom against the supposedly wise pursuits of Man. In Judaism, the book is normally read in moments of joy (such as after a harvest) to remind technical Man that he must not believe himself to be the Cause of his apparent successes. See Julius Guttman. *Philosophies of Judaism: the history of Jewish philosophy from biblical times to Franz Rosenzweig*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964.

will. These are the synthetic words of a commentator, which I deem quite accurate in defining Luther's position:

> Erasmus' ultimate condemnation by Luther can be found in the book's opening words. The writing is trenchant, with an overall Final Judgment tone, and embodies the diversity of both men's assumptions. On Erasmus' side, there is a paramount intelligence that, however, evades every decision. On Luther's, there is the irrefutable truth, invulnerable to sophistry, of a holy and marvelous God, for whom reason and will are gladly taken captive in obedience and humility.
>
> Martin N. Dreher, "Introdução a 'Da vontade cativa' de Martin Lutero" in *Obras selecionadas, debates e controvérsias II.* Belém: Editora Sinodal/Concórdia Editora, 1993, p. 16.

Sophism: the position that reveres the functional autonomy of the will and of reason is seen as no more than intelligent word games – and therefore worthless in the eyes of God (He acts *against* and *beyond* such games) –, which are irrelevant to decision-making and, thus, totally without value. Its value is merely the repetition of the love for one's self, the hubris of the creature. The perception that advocating for human autonomy is empty rhetoric against empirical evidences that deny the consistency of such rhetoric completely pervades Augustinianism as understood by the Reformation and by Jansenism.[13] In his *Preface to the epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (1546 version), Luther expounds his skepticism:

> Hence all men are called liars in Psalm 116 [:11] because no one keeps or can keep God's law from the bottom of the heart. For everyone finds in himself displeasure in what is good and pleasure in what is bad. If, now, there is no willing pleasure in the good, then the inmost heart is not set on the law of God. […]
>
> Accustom yourself, then, to this language, that doing the works of the law and fulfilling the law are two very different things. The work of the law is everything that one does, or can do, towards keeping the law of his own free will or by his own power. But since in the midst of all these works and along with them there remains in the heart a dislike of the law […] these works are all wasted and have no value. […] Hence, you see that the wranglers and sophists practice deception when they teach men to prepare themselves for grace by means of works. How can a man prepare himself for good by means of works, if he does good works only with aversion and unwillingness in his heart? How shall a work please God if it proceeds from a reluctant and resisting heart? […]
>
> Faith is not the human notion and dream that some people call faith. […] This is due to the fact that when they hear the gospel, they get busy and by their own powers create an idea in their heart which says, "I believe"; they take this then to be a true faith. But it is a human figment and idea that never reaches the depths of the heart, nothing come of it either, and no improvement follows.

---

[13]   The empiricist bias (there is more reality in the non-humanistic doubts of the skeptics than in the defense of humanism) in scholarly Augustinian tradition is confirmed by Philippe Sellier. *Pascal et Saint Augustin*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1995.

Martin Luther, *Preface to the epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* in *Op. cit.*, pp. 90, 92, 94.

In this long quote, where Luther recalls the classical Pauline critique of the *behaviorism* of works[14], we see the chain of arguments that goes from the refusal to vainly and exteriorly execute God's will (the Law) to the definition of the essentially *invisible* character of this Law. If we bear in mind that, in Judaism, the Law is the manifestation of God's will and that, strictly speaking, there is no *ontological* theology in biblical Judaism (but rather only moral theology – or ethical monotheism[15]), we will see that the Luther's discussion deals in-depth with what could be the beginning of any relationship between Man and God. It follows, then, that there can be *no* relationship between Man and God if the latter does not take the initiative (and herein, perhaps, lies one of the reasons Catholics accuse Luther of "hebrewifying" Christianity when he makes God "excessively" transcendental). The *ontological* exile is *represented* by a structural, rather than contextual, moral inconsistency (if we assume the fallen condition as structure). According to Luther, the human heart is incapable of feeling true pleasure as it seeks to fulfill God's will – and, therefore, is incapable of adhering to the *ethics* of God, the only dimension of the divine *Being* that we know – because the human heart is lost in gestural *rhetoric*, that is, amidst mere inarticulate mimicry. Further on, Luther proceeds from the abyss that lacerates Man – the internal fracture between the gestural rhetoric of the visible and his profound moral inconsistency – to the *ontological* abyss between nature and the supernatural: that which we *psychologically* (my term) understand when uttering things like "I believe" is not the entelechy of true faith. The human heart, which is the locus of God's will gone adrift and the milieu of the creature's hedonism, is incapable of making a leap with a morally consistent – and, thus, ontological (as far as Judaism or Christianity are concerned) – differential: true faith, understood as being attuned to the will of God, derives from a *Cause* that has no place in natural human dynamics. Luther is criticizing the idea that there might perhaps be sufficiency in the human ethical *system*. But, whatever human sufficiency might be, it will only be the monotony of sin. There is no "humanism" here, merely an ingrained suspicion that the "humanism" of natural human dignity – the strict exclusion Transcendence – is simply and solely part of the gestures that delineate and make visible the dynamics of the Fall. As the Fall is a *fall* in the grief-stricken purity of the creature, and as the creature is ontologically devoured by the *void*, it is only natural for Luther to deem a text that speaks of *clouds of nothingness* (Ecclesiastes) as profoundly wise

---

[14] A critique that was and is part of Judaism itself. Thus, Paul is seen here as Jew critical of the legalist trend, which Jewish philosopher Abraham Ioshua Heschel calls "religious behaviorism" – the concern with the external fulfillment of the Law, in order to attain public recognition as a decorous Jew, without inner consistence (i.e., without spirit). See *God in search of man*. New York: FSG, 1999.

[15] See Walter Rehfeld. *Nas sendas do judaísmo*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2003.

regarding the haughty *humanistic* delusions. In this commentary on Galatians, Luther summarizes his criticism:

> Our opponents go even further than that. They say, nature is depraved, but the qualities of nature are untainted. Again we say: This may hold true in everyday life, but not in the spiritual life. In spiritual matters, a person is by nature full of darkness, error, ignorance, malice, and perverseness in will and in mind.

> Martin Luther. *Commentary upon the epistle to the Galatians.* Translated by Theodore Graebner. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1949.

By necessity, the reach of misery is here amplified: immersed in the *condition* that is denied by the *humanistic oration*, Man, in Luther's eyes, is a somnambulist. Theologically, Luther is speaking of sin; philosophically, his discourse sheds light on the human condition with his suspicions of an ontological dysfunction. Skeptical arguments, when they are not at the service of a purely formal and cynical rhetoric, tend to be dismal for the techniques of vanity. Karl Barth, the great protestant theologian of the 20th century, defines reformed anthropology:

> The perversion of sin is brought forth from the depths and center of human existence, from the human heart. And the resulting state of sinful perversion extends to the entirety of his way of being, with no exception to any of its determinations.

> Karl Barth, *Dogmatique IV*. Cahier n. 1, Geneva, p. 58.

Barth's words point to the same *amplification* Luther spoke of: it is a critical anthropology with an empirical appeal, fruit of theological dogmas applied philosophically. The perfectibility of Man, heralded by the "disjunction" mentioned above, after having *pragmatically* excluded the theological *vocabulary*, will have to deal nevertheless with its philosophical remnants.

Pascal[16] was not a Lutheran and wrote some of his *Écrits sur la grace*[17] against the Reformation. However, the relationships between Jansenism and the Reformation (Luther and Calvin) remain a plenteous field of scholarship. Perhaps the continuous accusations made by Jesuitical Molinism that the Jansenist interpretation of Augustine is actually *Protestantism* are

---

[16] I have already dealt with Pascal's philosophical anthropology in two books, *O homem insuficiente* (2001) and *Conhecimento na desgraça* (2004), both published by Edusp, and therefore will not repeat what I have said there. My intention is merely to stress some specific points that might shed light on the false sufficiency of the *humanistic oration*.

[17] See Blaise Pascal. "Écrits sur la grace" in *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris: Jean Mesnard, 1991, v. III.

not entirely unfounded.[18] However, my interest here are not the particularities that separate Pascal from Luther (that is, Pascal's rebuttal of Man's *imperviousness* to effective grace, which he believed was an *error* found both Luther and Calvin – against his own position that Man remains permeable to effective grace but is never the efficient or sufficient cause of the actions of grace) but their critical stance vis-à-vis the *humanistic oration* – namely, that the *Cause* of the possible relationship between Man and God is always non-human and that, by definition, Man is morally *dysfunctional* when he is not under or submissive to the actions of God. This position implies that ideas of possible human perfectibility, whatever they may be, are either divine or an error (and, therefore, doubly grievous). In this sense, the anthroponomical "disjunction" would obviously be an error: *man by himself* is always miserable, because his condition is that of a circular animal.

> By considering their effects, we can identify the causes, the former being meritorious causes of the latter, the latter being the final causes of the former. But if we take them all together, there is no cause outside the will of God.
>
> Blaise Pascal, "Lettre sur la possibilité de commandements" in *Écrits sur la grace*,
> p. 658.

In this short excerpt, we have an example of Pascal's arguments defining the ethical *Cause* as God, even if this is not immediately evident. *Within* the ethical causal web, there seems to be a cause other than effective grace, but when our perspective transcends our *cognitive provincialism,* we become aware that this cause is always secondary.[19] Pascal's arguments are more markedly philosophical, inasmuch as they have greater autonomy vis-à-vis vocabularies that are not theologically rooted (Revelation). However, according to Pascal himself in the passage above, we can also apply a differential epistemic perception (between a *local* outlook and an enhanced vision of the arguments/causes that sustain the overall conceptual web) and, in this manner, perceive that his thinking is essentially religious[20] – as Luther's. We will mention three concepts in particular, which are not directly related to the moral/theological controversy, as examples of Pascal's anthropological criticism regarding the feasibility of the *oration of perfectibility*: the pair *divertissement x ennui* (entertainment x anxiety/boredom/annoyance); the faculty of contingency, that is, imagination and its perverse effects; and Man's disjunctive nature derived from the heterogeneity of his constituent orders.

---

[18] See Hélène Michon. *L'ordre du coeur, philosophie, théologie et mystique dan les Pensées de Pascal.* Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996.

[19] See Luiz Felipe Pondé. *Conhecimento na desgraça*. Edusp, 2004..

[20] I do not intend here get to the bottom of these roots; it suffices to say they are close to Augustinian Protestantism. See Luiz Felipe Pondé. *O homem insuficiente*. Edusp, 2001.

At the end of Pascal's argumentation, we are left with an *a priori dysfunctional* Man, in whom the disqualification of the idea of *dignitas hominis* breaks through the frontiers of a *merely* moral discussion.

.

> Boredom
> Man finds nothing so intolerable as to in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells ups from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair.
>
> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*. Translated by A. J. Krailsheimer, ed. Lafuma, frag. 622.

In this fragment, Pascal makes his *existential* analysis of Man. Indeed, his argument is that when Man does not move (is not entertained), he necessarily submerges into what sprouts from his heart, because this is his structural essence. Pascal refutes the idea that when this self-alienating movement ceases, Man can exist without experiencing anguish, despair and sadness. The focus of his analysis seems to stray away from an eminently moral argumentation and to delve into a profound psychological scenario. In this sense, the rhetoric *gestures* of perfectibility would be a means of deflecting Man's essential agony, of denying the theological conditioning – yet Man would nevertheless fall prey to inevitable ontological anguish. Would it be possible to deny this profoundly *negative* self-awareness highlighted by Pascal (that imbues us with feelings of structural unsustainability in very precise empirical terms: disease, old age, continuous cognitive failures, the inertia of moral misery throughout history) without resorting to deviating resources? Most of the time, Pascal seems to say there is no way to escape the dynamics of despair without the intervention of God. His subject matter is the phenomenology of conversion, which he deals with in his spiritual correspondence, and he eventually meanders into a rumination on *déchirement* (laceration), while sustaining that the withdrawal of human *desire* from the world of creatures is experienced as an agony that tears the very innards of the human structure – of Man, this lover of the creature.[21] Furthermore, in a state of *déchirement*, with regard to our affections, agony cannot be replaced by the *deliria* of pleasure. Pascal seems to think that, from a strictly human point of view, the *only* thing we can do when we are overcome by agony (that springs upon us when the deviating movements cease) is to bravely face it by suspending the mechanisms of self-delusion. In this way, there would at least be some oxygen for negativity in strictly human terms. For Pascal, then, a human being that does not lie is, necessarily, a melancholic. Moreover, any *oration* of perfectibility would be a lie in virtue of

---

[21] See Luiz Felipe Pondé. *Op. cit*., particularly chapter 2.

this profound condition experienced by anyone who has ever looked within himself and apprehended his overwhelming ontological *void*. This is the minimal *definition*: the awareness of our structural unsustainability.

> Imagination
> It is the dominant faculty in man, master of error and falsehood, all the more deceptive for not being invariably so; for it would be an infallible criterion of truth if it were infallibly that of lies. Since, however, it is usually false, it gives no indication of its quality, setting the same mark on true and false alike. I am not speaking of fools, but of the wisest men, amongst whom imagination is best entitled to persuade. Reason may object in vain, it cannot fix the price of things.
>
> Blaise Pascal. *Op. cit.*, 44.

This is classical Pascal expounding how reason engenders unhappiness whereas imagination is the mistress of joy. The breadth of his criticism even touches upon epistemology, which is not, however, our focus in this essay. The faculty that brands everything with the same sign (namely, the contingency of *imagined* adherence) also dissolves all criteria. Its perverse action is greater among the "wise", inasmuch as intellectual pride is greater among them and inexorably leads them to diminishing epistemic activity – the Augustinian tendency of turning morality into an epistemic transcendental is obvious in Pascal. The disjointedness promoted by the imagination turns the *oration* of perfectibility into a ludicrous act, as Man never *knows* what he thinks he *knows* – be it in a strictly cognitive realm or in a moral or value-driven one. The final statement is exceptionally skeptical with regard to how much humans can grasp and a useless cry is all that is left.

In *Lafuma* 308 and 933, famous fragments where Pascal reclaims Augustine's three lusts (matter/body, spirit/knowledge, will/pride/caritas or God) and turns them into three general ontological orders, the ludicrousness of human dignity is deepened by a structural ontological *bias*. Pascal scholar Jean-Luc Marion has this to say about those fragments:

> But, above all, it establishes that Pascal only joins them in order to disjoint *[disjoindre]* them; actually, far from constituting a system […], as Pascal reinstates them, they are definitely separated by a "distance". […] Infinite means here immeasurableness and "infinite distance" […] abolishes once and for all every measurable relationship – one might say every ordination […] neither *ordo* nor *mesura* can assure a systematized sequence.
>
> Jean-Luc Marion. *Sur le prisme métaphysique de Descartes.* Paris: PUF, 1986, p. 327.

Marion is referring to the relationship that Pascal establishes between the elements of Descartes' metaphysics and his own orders. Marion's intention is to show that the signs that sustain a metaphysical, world-organizing system are shattered by Pascal's cosmic disjunction – this is Marion means when, later on, he talks about the "derangement" of concepts. Man and the cosmos do not compose the idea of *minimal nature* and, therefore, are not metaphysically founded. The breadth of this *negative* metaphysics distresses an *imagined* dignity in the same way the universe is *defined* by *undefinableness* and is, therefore, deranged – an infinitely infinite heterogeneous distance produces abysses where there ought to be a system. The infinite is a sign not of unending power (*undefined*, as in Pico's *Oration*), but of *exile* in the *void* of structure. It is a negative infinite: there are no hierarchies, no fixed properties, only infinite spaces, devoid of any sustainable relationship.

Remains

In the eyes of those who criticize humanistic perfectibility, the *construction* of the ludicrous *oration* is more than fruit of a conscious decision by the sinner; in philosophical and theological terms, it is the remains of the inherent somnambulism of Man's disjunctive mechanics – exiled from his founding *Cause*, mired in internal contingencies, smothered by a heart that lies the whole time, Man is an animal of fear. Dignity can never be founded by a being that, in himself, is without foundation, is a mere shadow trying to reach itself. The *thought* of dignity does not establish dignity. Man does not *found* value – this is a truly human experience, the outcome of reasonably elucidative scholarship. Perhaps we, post-moderns, better than Renaissance men, can *experience* the negative awareness of this risible *oration*. And I do not find it at all strange that, of late, this *oration* has become increasingly closer to (and needy of) the rhetoric of advertising.

References

BARTH, K. *Dogmatique IV*. Cahier. Genève, n. 1.

CASSIRER, E. KRISTELLER, P.O. RANDALL, Jr., J.H. *The Renaissance philosophy of man*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956.

ESPRIT, J. *La fausseté des vertus humaines*. Paris: Aubier, 1996.

FAYE, E. *Philosophie et perfection le l'homme*. Paris: J. Vrin, 1998.

GOUHIER, H. *L'anti-humanisme au XVIIeme siècle*. Paris: J. Vrin, 1987.

GUTTMANN, J. *A filosofia do judaísmo*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2003.

HESCHEL, A.I. *Go in search of man*. New York: FSG, 1999.

KAFKA, F. "A Construção" in *Um artista da fome/A construção.* São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.

LUTHER, M, *Comentaire de l'épitre aux Galates*. Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1958.

_____. "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans" in *Faith and freedom: an invitation to the writings of Martin Luther*. John F. Thornton & Susan B. Varenne (orgs.). New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics/Random House, 2002.

_____. "Preface to Solomon's Ecclesiastes" in *Faith and freedom: an invitation to the writings of Martin Luther*. John F. Thornton & Susan B. Varenne (orgs.). New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics/Random House, 2002.

_____. *"Da Vontade Cativa" in *Obras selecionadas: debates e controvérsias II*. Belém: Editora Sinodal/Concórdia Editora, 1993.

MARION, J.L. *Sur le prisme métaphysique de Descartes.* Paris: PUF, 1986.

MIRANDOLA, Pico della. *"Oration on the Dignity of Man" in *The Renaissance philosophy of man*, E. Cassirer, P. O. Kristeller & J. H. Randall, Jr, (orgs.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956.

PASCAL, B. *Pensées,* ed. Lafuma. Paris: Intégrale/Seuil, 1963.

_____. *"Écrits sur la Grace" in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jean Mesnard. Paris: DDB, 1991.

PONDÉ, L.F. *O homem insuficiente*. São Paulo: Edusp, 2001.

_____. *Conhecimento na desgraça.* São Paulo: Edusp, 2004.

QUIGNARD, P. "Traité sur Esprit" in *La fausseté des vertus humaine: Jacques Esprit*. Paris: Aubier, 1996.

AUGUSTINE, Aurelius. "De natura et gratia" in *La crise Pélagienne*, v. I. Paris: IEA, 1994.

_____. *"Epistula ad Hilarium Syracusanum" in *La crise Pélagienne*, v. I. Paris: IEA, 1994.

SELLIER, P. *Pascal et saint Augustin.* Paris: Albin Michel, 1995.

REHFELD, W. *Nas sendas do judaísmo.* São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2003.

RENAUDET, A. *Autour d'une définition de l'humanisme*, Biblioethèque Française de l'Humanisme, Travaux T. VI, 1945.