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Anthropology, Negative and Positive:
Heidegger, Levinas, Lévi-Strauss, Arendt

Supervisor: **Prof. dr. Bart Raymaekers**

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… and there is pansies, that's for thoughts.

— *Hamlet*, act IV, scene v

"Bouquet de Pensées," by Pierre-Joseph Redouté, published in Choix des plus belles fleurs et des plus beaux fruits *(Paris: Panckoucke, 1827), p. 25, chosen by Lévi-Strauss as the frontispiece for* La pensée sauvage.

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Introduction

At its broadest, this thesis takes as its theme the relationship between philosophy on the one hand and politics, religion, and science on the other. At the crux of these relationships, as Kant pointed out long ago, is the question of anthropology: What is man? The answer to this question, Kant says, is given by the answers to his three better-known philosophical questions — What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? — since man, for Kant, is at once cognizer, agent, and conditioned by history and culture.[1] How to philosophically approach a human being as at the same time a thing that thinks, that acts, and that is itself constituted by larger structures is a problem that preoccupied twentieth-century philosophers from Heidegger to Foucault to Arendt and beyond. In this thesis, I approach this problem from the perspective of Heidegger's reception and deep influence in twentieth-century thought, and in particular the fraught "anthropologization" of *Dasein*. I address this theme at a level between history of philosophy and intellectual history, since the problem of Heidegger is at once a problem of philosophy and of the human sciences, a problem *of* and *for* thinking.

Yet the question this thesis tries to answer is nonetheless not ultimately historical — how did Heidegger and his interpreters conceive of the human being? — but philosophical, and thus in response to the question Kant asks: what is man? At this broad level, I take the inspiration for my approach from the work of Hannah Arendt. Arendt herself worked through

[1] "The field of philosophy … can be reduced to the following questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? What is man? [*Was ist der Mensch?*] *Metaphysics* answers the first question, *morals* the second, *religion* the third, and *anthropology* the fourth. Fundamentally, however, we could reckon all of this as anthropology, because the first three questions relate to the last one." Immanuel Kant, *Akademie Ausgabe* 9:25; translation in Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, ed. and trans. J. Michael Young, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 538., also quoted in Patrick R. Frierson, *What Is the Human Being?*, Kant's Questions (New York: Routledge, 2013), vi. It is important to note that in this late, post-critical work (1800) Kant is *retrospectively* re-interpreting his three *Critiques* (which correspond to the three questions) as coming together in the one final anthropological question. The three first questions are given in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)., A:805/B:833.

the Kantian legacy right until the end of her career, while remaining preoccupied with the contested inheritance of Heideggerian antihumanism — inevitably colored by her own personal and intellectual relationship with Heidegger, especially as a German Jew forced to flee from the Third Reich.[2] Arendt has been variously read as a political theorist of liberalism and as one of its most astute critics, accused both of being too Kantian and not Kantian enough, and taken to task both for remaining too closely allied with her teacher's antihumanist project and not being sufficiently aware of its philosophical import.[3] I am not interested in taking up these interpretative disputes, but instead embracing precisely the *openness* of Arendt's work by beginning to think with her unique preoccupations and problematics. After all, Arendt's injunction in *The Human Condition* is "very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing."[4] In this light, I understand Arendt's work as being at once deeply philosophical and, in being philosophical, concerned with that which eludes philosophy (or that philosophy elides), politics. While Arendt and Kant do not form the foreground of this work, they frame the questions I ask and the approach I adopt.

At the foreground of this work is one philosophical theme that emerges in the reception of Heidegger's work in France from about 1930 to 1960: "negative philosophical anthropology," which Emmanuel Levinas says in a 1956 essay "holds the surprise for us of an atheism that is not humanist."[5] What does this phrase mean? What are the philosophical and

[2] For Arendt's relationship with Kant see Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990)., all that remains of the unfinished third volume of her last work, Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1971). On Arendt's relationship with Heidegger see (among countless works of widely varying quality) the canonical biography by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982). and Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker: Arendt and Heidegger*, ed. and trans. Michael Gendre (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997). My approach to Arendt's work, in terms both of philosophy and of intellectual history, is strongly shaped by Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996).
[3] I am thinking of, for instance, the famous critique of Arendt by Jürgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," trans. Thomas McCarthy, *Social Research* 44, no. 1 (1977): 3–24., but also of more recent attempts to take Arendt to task over her prejudices on the grounds of race and class in, for example, Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.
[5] Emmanuel Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot," in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 127.

historical elements that are crystallized in this kind of thought in France in the years before and after World War II? The first chapter of this thesis addresses this question with particular reference to the work of Stefanos Geroulanos, an intellectual historian, guiding my own readings of salient texts by Levinas and Heidegger.

In the second chapter, I turn from *negative* to *positive* anthropology by focusing on one work that emerges from this historical-intellectual milieu: *La pensée sauvage* (1962) by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Situating himself within the debate over the "anthropologization" of *Dasein*, Lévi-Strauss claimed that the task of the human sciences, including anthropology, was now "not to constitute man, but to dissolve him."[6] And yet, Lévi-Strauss' work is driven as much by a *positive* science of anthropology as by a Heideggerian *negative* anthropology. This aspect of Lévi-Strauss' work has usually been discussed in relation to his uptake of Saussure and of earlier "scientific" anthropologists (including through the time he spent in the Amazon in the 1930s). By contrast, I focus on Lévi-Strauss' reading of Auguste Comte's positivism (which is only fully fleshed out in the final 2005–06 revision of *La pensée sauvage*).

In the third chapter, I conclude by considering the stakes of contemporary philosophical anthropology, taking as exemplary Philippe Descola's uptake of Lévi-Strauss as part of the so-called "ontological turn" of the past quarter-century. For Descola and his readers, as for many other anthropologists today, anthropology is inscribed as both science and critique, both an operation of knowledge and a site of its destabilization — in other words, anthropology today is at once *positive* and *negative*. Following Descola, I turn to Donna Haraway as a way back to Hannah Arendt around questions of situated knowledges, embodied practices, and moral-political action. Together, these contemporary thinkers allow

[6] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought: A New Translation of La Pensée Sauvage*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and John Harold Leavitt (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 281.

us to consider the stakes of anthropology, both positive and negative, today, and thus return to the Kantian question with which we began.

I recognize that in my thesis there are pertinent questions of the history of science/philosophy that I am bracketing (e.g. pertaining to biology, race, and technology), just as I am bracketing other philosophical questions that each could have deserved their own independent treatment (for instance, the development of "negation" from Kant to Hegel to Heidegger and beyond, the complicated formation and legacies of positivism, and the question of transcendence and the turn to religion in twentieth-century philosophy).[7] I do not claim in this thesis to have exhaustively treated any one of these questions philosophically or historically. Instead, I approach the basic question of philosophical anthropology — what is man? — by tracing a particular trajectory in the history of philosophy that gives a view on the fraught status of antihumanism in twentieth-century thought and its contested legacy today.

I. Negative anthropology, or Heidegger *à la française*

In 1956, Emmanuel Levinas wrote that "Contemporary thought holds the surprise for us of an atheism that is not humanist."[8] Stefanos Geroulanos takes the title of his book, *An Atheism that is not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, from this expression. The book's purpose is to account for how in post-WWI France (and specifically between 1926 and 1950) there emerged for the first time an atheism that was not a secularism, i.e. not simply an arrogation of that which was previously divine to the human. The First World War, Geroulanos argues, catalyzed an intellectual movement that rejects progress wholesale, "opening up an apocalyptic imagination and by and large destroying the cultural optimism

[7] On the latter question, see for instance Hent De Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). I give references to works treating the other questions in the relevant sections below.

[8] Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot," 127. In the original French: "La pensée contemporaine nous reserve la surprise d'un athéisme qui n'est pas humaniste." Emmanuel Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), 10.

that had marked the turn of the twentieth century."[9] Intellectual historians have previously traced the effects of this postwar pessimism on philosophy as inaugurating antifoundationalism in a variety of European philosophical traditions, many of which are otherwise quite divergent. This includes intellectual histories of phenomenology, the Vienna Circle, and Wittgenstein, to name a few, which share modernist or antifoundationalist "styles" with their literary and artistic contemporaries, including Bauhaus architecture and the popular writing of Oswald Spengler.[10] Geroulanos' intervention is to characterize this antifoundationalism as a new kind of atheism, thus naming a common break with nineteenth-century humanist thought.

Previous kinds of atheism, such as Feuerbach's, perform the death of God by making man the center of the world. Along these lines, one might say that Kant's Copernican turn prepared the ground for a humanist atheism, by delimiting the space for God in such a way that Kant's successors can further confine the realm of the divine by aggrandizing the role of the human being at the center of this new Copernican metaphysics. The actors Geroulanos identifies took issue with this previous atheism. As he writes:

> For philosophers like Koyré, Kojève, Bataille, and Heidegger, secular humanisms tend toward religion (and specifically toward a naturalized Christianity). This is especially so because … they tend to replace God with man, history, a political messianism, the Nation, or the State, frequently pushing under the rug religious problems and questions. … The thinkers considered here treated the concept of man by voiding it of foundationalism, arguing in this way against Kant, against the Platonic-Christian idea that man possesses an eternal soul, against the tradition of identifying man with a certain feature, aspect, or property that embodies or expresses his nature, against the Feuerbachian-Marxist approach that sees Man as his own goal, and above all against the idea of a human nature that is given, foundational, single, or readily available.[11]

[9] Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 5.
[10] See, e.g., Peter Galison, "Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (1990): 709–52; Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Free Press, 1990); David Edmonds, *The Murder of Professor Schlick* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).
[11] Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, 6, 14.

This diagnosis opens the way to an "atheist critique of transcendence, progress, and utopia" that would peak in the wake of the Second World War's destruction, in turn making possible movements like Lévi-Strauss' structuralism and later the anti- or post-humanism that Foucault and Derrida played a part in inaugurating. In the second and third chapters, we will turn in more detail to structuralism and its uptake today. But first, I want to focus on the philosophical and historical conditions that made possible the work of Lévi-Strauss and, by extension, anthropology today. In particular, in this chapter I read works by Levinas and Heidegger alongside Geroulanos' historical account in order to respond to the question: in what ways were "man" or "the human" and "anthropology" figured in the interwar decades in French thought?

I. 1. Levinas and Kant

Let us first turn to the work of Levinas from which Geroulanos takes his title, originally published under the title "Maurice Blanchot et le regard du poète" in the March 1956 issue of *Monde Nouveau*.[12] This work can be understood as a summation of the intellectual movements Geroulanos surveys, albeit via a retrospective glance by one of the key figures of that period. Levinas writes:

> Everyone seems to think this century is the end of philosophy! This includes those who want to build a better world, to bring about change [*changer et non seulement comprendre*, a reference to Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*], and not just understand, as well as those who, at the other end of the spectrum [*à leurs antipodes*], go back to the "truth of being" with Heidegger, to welcome its early morning rays, which will make the love of wisdom and its subdivision into disciplines pale in its light. Contemporary thought holds the surprise for us of an atheism that is not humanist. The gods are dead or withdrawn from the world; concrete, even rational man does not contain the universe. In all those books that go beyond metaphysics we witness the exaltation of an obedience and a faithfulness that are not obedience or faithfulness to anyone. The absence of the gods translates into [*se joue comme*] an indeterminate presence. A strange nothingness that does not keep still but "nihilates" [*singulier néant qui ne reste pas tranquille, mais "néantit"*]; a silence gifted with speech, an essential speech, even. A faceless neuter, "sans figure," in Blanchot's phrase, even though a black light emanates from their [viz. the absent gods'] anonymous, incessant movement [*leurs*

[12] For more information on this essay, see Kevin Hart, "Ethics of the Image," *Levinas Studies* 1 (2005): 119–38.

> *anonymes et incessants remous*, literally "eddies"].[13]

We see first signaled "the end of philosophy," that antifoundationalist move we might attribute to Heidegger and find traces of in, for instance, Levinas and Derrida. This "end of progress" in philosophy might mark a sort of nostalgia for earlier times (the "early morning rays," for instance, that tickled the faces of Heidegger's Greeks as they emerged from the caves, in an age before the *Seinsfrage* was concealed). But Levinas seems to want to warn us away from a sort of declinism that is nonetheless teleological (e.g. à la Spengler, who after all was quite influential for both Heidegger and for Wittgenstein).

Instead, Levinas wants to say: what replaces metaphysics? Nothing. As he goes on to write:

> In Heidegger, being, in the verbal sense he gives it, to distinguish it from beings (but everyone knows these distinctions in France), is the measure of all things, and of man. Man answers, or does not answer, its call. But a call that does not come from anyone. It comes from Being, which is not a being [*il vient de l'Etre qui n'est pas un étant*] — from a phosphorescence of Nothingness, or, more precisely, from a luminosity in which the ebb and flow of Nothingness and Being continue on [*d'une luminosité où se poursuit le flux et le reflux du Néant et de l'Etre*]. Subjectivity's meaning does not come from itself, but from that phosphorescence, from the truth of being [*la verité de l'être*]. As early as Aristotle, according to Heidegger, Western metaphysics had already forgotten that truth of being, forming "the image of the world" and progressing toward dominance through science [*Depuis Aristote, la métaphysique occidentale l'aurait déjà oubliée, elle façonne "l'image du monde" et marche vers la domination technique* — I give the full French version of this sentence because Heidegger is not mentioned at all, and I would hesitate to translate "*domination technique*" with "domination through science."]. But all this — subject, forgetting of the truth of being, metaphysics, image of the world, science [*technique*] — is not the fault or caprice of man, but rather reflects the truth of being and its exigencies, even though man may be the very vocation of keeping watch over that truth [*l'homme fût-il la vocation de garder cette verité*]; that is, vigilance and attention.[14]

The hegemony of science (*technique*), identified with humanism in its nineteenth-century guise, is a side-effect of forgetting the question of Being (says Levinas, echoing the

[13] Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot," 128. I have not modified Smith's translation, but have indicated in square brackets passages from the original French: Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot*, 9–10.
[14] Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot," 128. Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot*, 10–11.

Heidegger of "The Age of the World View").[15] But to signal the end of metaphysics is not to signal the end of Being, for it is Being's call that man heard first with the pre-Socratics and can come to hear again if we learn to ignore the ruckus about beings and attune ourselves instead to Being. What is the status of man with respect to Being? If he is not the center of the world, that creature in whose structures of thought metaphysical categories are to be found, is he demoted again to an expression of a transcendent beyond? For Levinas, the answer is no: God is still dead, and what is left is Nothingness. The call that man answers comes not from anybody or anything but "from a luminosity in which the ebb and flow of Nothingness and Being continue on." It is in that phosphorescence that subjectivity can have meaning.

We might say, thinking with Levinas, that Kant is the exemplary figure of replacing dogmatic, theological metaphysics with man. Following Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, categories like space and time are no longer divine ideas. Rather, they are the categories of human understanding that constitute the objects of our comprehension — that is to say, objects of a human reason that can then be approached with the tools of critique to establish metaphysics as a true science.[16] In short, Kant made metaphysics a human province. In the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant further radicalized his move of making man his own end, so that anthropology retrospectively becomes the linchpin for the three *Critiques*. As Geroulanos puts it:

> This stance [that anthropology brings together the project of the three critiques, which Kant

[15] Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World View," trans. Marjorie Grene, *Boundary 2* 4, no. 2 (1976): 341–55. Consider also what Heidegger writes in the "Letter on Humanism": "Philosophy is hounded [*gejagt*, literally "hunted"] by the fear that it loses prestige and validity if it is not a science [*Wissenschaft*]. Not to be a science is taken as a failing [*Mangel*, lit. "defect"] that is equivalent to being unscientific. Being, as the element of thinking, is abandoned [*preisgegeben*, lit. "disclosed" or "relinquished"] by the technical interpretation of thinking. … Thinking is judged by a standard that does not measure up to it. Such judgment may be compared to the procedure of trying to evaluate the essence and powers of a fish by seeing how long it can live on dry land. For a long time now, all too long, thinking has been stranded on dry land." Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings: From* Being and Time *(1927) to* The Task of Thinking *(1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell, Revised and expanded edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 219.

[16] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. See also Omri Boehm, *Kant's Critique of Spinoza* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

> adopts in the *Lectures on Logic*] is bolstered further when read together with the opening of the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, where Kant declared man (in words that would later motivate and be echoed by Feuerbach and the early Marx) as his own ultimate end. Humanism could then be defined as the mobilization of a foundationalist concept of man.[17]

Speaking historically, then, Kant's thought inaugurated a long-nineteenth-century faith in the power of (Western) man to bring order to the world through the use of reason and of technology. In its most radical form, this humanism makes man the master of the world, rather than the world being the master of man: no longer a plaything of the gods or of wild nature, but an agent in setting his fate on the path of progress through Enlightenment. As Kant puts it in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*:

> The most important revolution from within the human being is "his exit from his self-incurred immaturity." Before this revolution he let others think for him and merely imitated others or allowed them to guide him by leading-strings. Now he ventures to advance, though still shakily, with his own feet on the ground of experience.[18]

Feuerbach was, in a way, just radicalizing this claim: even God, he said in *The Essence of Christianity*, is but a projection of humans onto the heavens, even God is naught but a representation of human essence.[19] Comte could be said to be fleshing out this humanist atheism into its most recognizable religious form, replete with a catechism, symbology, and theory of knowledge; Marx is harder to pin down, but at the very least presented himself at some point as an inheritor and radicalizer of Feuerbach, agreeing that everything, including God, is a projection of humans on the world, but stressing that this is not a projection of the

[17] Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, 13–14.
[18] Kant, *Akademie Ausgabe* 7:229, translated in Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. and trans. Robert Louden, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambdrige University Press, 2006), 124.. The quote is to his earlier essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?", translated in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Mary J. Gregor, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 17. Foucault adopts the same position in his own response to Kant's essay. See further Sabina F. Vaccarino Bremner, "Anthropology as Critique: Foucault, Kant and the Metacritical Tradition," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (March 3, 2020): 346–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2019.1650250.
[19] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans [George Eliot] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139136563.

mind but of material reality through the tools of technology.[20] Summarizing this view of Kant in a lecture course he gave in Lille in 1952 (thus roughly contemporaneous with Levinas' publication), Foucault wrote that Kant's "work linked anthropology and critical thought in a community of fate that characterizes nineteenth century philosophical thought."[21]

The long nineteenth century came to an end: "God is dead," Nietzsche announced in *The Gay Science*, and the carnage of WWI just goes to show it.[22] But what kind of atheism is at stake here? When the gods withdraw, what is left both cannot and must be Man. Levinas writes: "The absence of the gods translates into an indeterminate presence. A strange nothingness that does not keep still but 'nihilates'; a silence gifted with speech, an essential speech, even." The human is not adequate as the grounds for the world, for ethics, for metaphysics, for the divine; it is obedience and faith *tout court* that are to be rejected, not just redirected towards man, reimagined. This problematic is posed for Levinas in terms of the "null-site of subjectivity" that Levinas would come to name in his late work *Otherwise than Being* as the un-original origin, the anarchical *arché*, that site when the subject comes into being in the face of the other.[23] This is not the place to inquire into how Levinas attempts to solve this philosophical conundrum. But the problematic that Levinas delineates indicates what Geroulanos names as the central philosophical innovation in France between the 1920s and the 1950s: "negative philosophical anthropology."

[20] This position is most concisely, if somewhat enigmatically, stated in Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 143–45.
[21] Michel Foucault, "Cours 1, Anthropologie et homme transcendantale," in *Cours à l'université de Lille* (1953), box 46, dossier 1, Fonds Michel Foucault, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 47. Quoted in Vaccarino Bremner, "Anthropology as Critique," 344. The Lille lectures have not so far been published, but for more information consult Elisabetta Basso, *Young Foucault: The Lille Manuscripts on Psychopathology, Phenomenology, and Anthropology, 1952-1955* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).
[22] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), sec. 125.
[23] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

I. 2. Heidegger

In particular, the "strange nothingness" of which Levinas speaks, the "Nothingness that 'nihilates'" (*le Néant qui néantit*), almost exactly quotes a well-known passage from Heidegger's 1929 lecture *Was ist Metaphysik?* There, Heidegger takes care to distinguish Nothing from non-being. He thus recuperates the metaphysical force of negativity, in a way that will become very important for elaborating a "negative anthropology." In particular, Heidegger stresses how "science wishes to know nothing of the nothing" (*die Wissenchaft will vom Nichts nichts wissen*). Heidegger says that, in speaking of nothing, "perhaps our confused talk [*dieses Hin und Her der Rede*] already degenerates into an empty squabble over words [*einem leeren Wortgezänk*]." In short,

> Science wants to know nothing about the nothing. But even so it is certain that when science tries to express its own proper essence it calls upon the nothing for help. It has recourse to what it rejects.[24]

It is hard not to think here of the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. That most logical and scientific of works had to precisely call upon the nothing, in extremity, in its last proposition: "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (*wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*).[25] The interpretations of such "nothing" are uncertain, and are precisely what are at stake in the lecture *Was ist Metaphysik?*: is that nothing whereof one cannot speak in any way meaningful or productive?

Heidegger thinks yes, very importantly yes. He borrows from Hegel the view that determinate negation is basically productive. Heidegger's view is usefully encapsulated by Iain Thomson:

> The nothing is that which allows us to grasp and conceptualize what, prior to such

[24] Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, trans. David Farrell Krell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 84; Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm Herrmann, 2., durchgesehene Auflage, Gesamtausgabe, Band 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996), 106.
[25] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D F Pears and B F McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1974), 89. In the Preface to the *Tractatus*, written in Vienna in 1918, Wittgenstein similarly writes: "The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence." Ibid., 3.

> conceptualization, remains inchoate and unformed in our phenomenological experience, not yet recognized as a meaningful entity, and in this sense not yet a thing (but rather a "no-thing"), hence (rather naturally in English at least) a "nothing." For Heidegger, "the nothing" does not designate brute non-being; what he calls "the nothing itself" is not nothing at all. … Such a null or nugatory nothingness would have no force or effect, whereas the phenomenon Heidegger calls "the nothing" actively *does* something: "the nothing itself noths or nihilates" (*Das Nichts selbst nichtet*).[26]

It is this very sentence that prompted great controversy. Exemplary here is Rudolf Carnap, who was in attendance at the original lecture in 1929, and two years later in 1931 would write an important article called "Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache," or "The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language."[27] Carnap used the sentence *Das Nichts selbst nichtet* as an example of a "pseudo-statement" that, in the final analysis, is proven to be meaningless — or, more precisely, devoid of any semantic content at all because of its basic logical errors, in this case Heidegger's hypostatization of negation.

Carnap uses Wittgenstein's term of "nonsense" to characterize such statements, but I doubt that Wittgenstein would have agreed with this interpretation. The later Wittgenstein, at least, would take an intermediate position between Heidegger and Carnap, probably seeing in a statement like "the nothing itself noths" an example of "running up against the limits of language."[28] However, even the early Wittgenstein remains open a certain kind of mysticism: this *precisely* in the form of negative theology, which after all is originally a quietist mysticism that acknowledges the existence of something beyond that which we can give

[26] Iain Thomson, "Nothing (*Nichts*)," in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 520–29, https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511843778.036. All italics in original.
[27] Rudolf Carnap, "Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache," *Erkenntnis* 2, no. 1 (December 1, 1931): 219–41, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02028153; Rudolf Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language," in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer, trans. Arthur Pap (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 60–81.
[28] "The results of philosophy are the discovery of one or another piece of plain nonsense and bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), sec. 119. But there is a good argument to be made, as many have done, that the earlier Wittgenstein already holds such a view. See, e.g., Hans Sluga, *Wittgenstein*, Blackwell Great Minds (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:101:1-201412286134.

positive statements to, and we must therefore be silent about — or, at best, speak about only in negation.

Heidegger takes up the latter route, and one way to read his subsequent philosophical development is as an elaboration of the original statement that *Das Nichts selbst nichtet* in a productive, positive direction that he would come to call "poietic." As Iain Thomson puts it:

> To put it more precisely, Heidegger's succinct, summarizing formulation, "the nothing itself noths," seeks to evoke both (1) that pre-linguistic "origin" (the primal phenomenological source or *Ursprung*) from which all ordinary concepts and established linguistic meanings first arise (namely, "the nothing itself") and also (2) the manner in which this pre-linguistic origin offers itself to language (by actively "noth-ing," so to speak). … We could thus finish Heidegger's famous sentence as follows: "the nothing itself noths" into meaningful words and concepts – with the help of Dasein's (poietic) acts of world-disclosure.[29]

The human is both negated as human and, as *Dasein*, essential to speaking of nothing, for *Dasein*'s attunement to Nothing is its fundamental occurrence.

I. 3. Translations

To address the theme of "negative anthropology" in French thought is therefore to track the translations of *Dasein*. In 1931, Heidegger's lecture *Was ist Metaphysik?* was translated into French by Henri Corbin (later to become best known as a scholar of Ibn-Arabi and Sufism, having studied and taught for many years in Tehran) and published under the title "Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?" with an introduction by Alexandre Koyré.[30] This was the first translation of Heidegger into French.[31] Corbin translated *Dasein* as "réalité humaine," or "human reality." This is generally agreed to be a mistranslation of *Dasein*, distorting Heidegger's meaning because of its stress on humanity and reality, both of which are for Heidegger derivative of the "thereness" of the human being that discloses Being. *Dasein* is

[29] Thomson, "Nothing (*Nichts*)."
[30] Martin Heidegger, "Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?," ed. Alexandre Koyré, trans. Henry Corbin, *Bifur* 8 (1931).
[31] The translation was later disavowed by Corbin, however, after meetings with Heidegger in Freiburg in 1934 to 1936, and revised for publication in 1938. This course of events has led to some confusion, since Corbin and Levinas both have a reasonable claim to being the first to introduce Heidegger to French readers, in a roughly contemporaneous period of the 1930s. For details of this history, see Dominique Janicaud, *Heidegger en France* (Paris: Albert Michel, 2001), 40–45.

emphatically *not* the Cartesian *res cogito*: it is, rather, always already being-there (*Da-sein*), always already engaged with the world, not in any sense pre-existing subjective experience but instead being precisely the postulate of its entire condition. Or, to put it otherwise, the answer to the question of Being is given by *Dasein*, in its encounter with the world, which is to say its co-constitution through intersubjectivity.

At this level, what is at stake is a question of translating, or grasping, the philosophical event that was *Sein und Zeit* (1929).[32] What can *Dasein* mean, if it is to be neither anthropological (i.e. after the model of the human) nor psychological (i.e. a model of the mind) nor, of course, theological (i.e. a divine presence for which the human is but a medium or expression)? Geroulanos responds by redirecting the question. He is not interested in proposing his own, finally correct, rendering of Heidegger; instead, Geroulanos traces historically a transformation in *French* thought. The invention of "human reality" may have been stimulated by Heidegger, and it may indeed have involved a mistranslation of his work, but ultimately what is at stake for Geroulanos, following Levinas, is the emergence of a genuinely new idea *in France* in the 1930s and 1940s. To this extent, "human reality" is indeed appropriate, for the term

> encompasses the push against idealism and the effort to explain the limitations of the human, its decentering and emptying out in reality. In "human reality," the human loses its separation from this reality and becomes enmeshed with it; at the same time, reality is designated as decidedly human, and not real by itself. … with Corbin's translation, it now means *Dasein*, that is, it largely names "human reality" the pure thereness, nonideality, and existence that is indicated by *Dasein*, and thus adjusts both "human" and "reality." It thereby allies the human, in its emptiness, with a reality distinctly dependent on it and pulls away "the human" from the foundationalism and idealism to which it was formerly tied and for which "human reality" would later unhistorically be criticized.[33]

"Human reality" designates on the one hand the impossibility of reality without humans in it and on the other hand the dislocation of humans from the center of reality. In order to

[32] Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967).
[33] Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, 53.

perform the intellectual history he has promised us, Geroulanos touches on translations like these but ultimately his is a reconstruction of how Levinas came to find himself in postwar France speaking of an atheism that is not humanist having emerged for the first time. We should not judge the French for correctly or incorrectly understanding Heidegger, Geroulanos tells us: what they did was to repurpose him for their own ends. Corbin's term may be a poor translation of *Dasein*, but, Geroulanos says, *réalité humaine* "inversely serves in the French context as an emptying out of anthropological categories — rejecting that human reality is anything other than the there-ness of *Dasein*."[34]

In short, Geroulanos tracks the operation of the term "human reality" not primarily to discuss the reception of Heidegger but rather to track the development of what he calls a "negative philosophical anthropology," which Geroulanos claims is the key French philosophical innovation between 1926 and 1950. But apart from translations of Heidegger, what does this idea actually consist in? Geroulanos says that "negative anthropology mirrors the principal claim and inspiration of negative theology — the denial to man of positive knowledge of divine nature and the refusal to him of affirmations concerning this nature."[35] To expand on this useful gloss: a long tradition of theology (not just Christian) claimed that God is beyond human comprehension or, indeed more strongly, that He is ineffable, undefinable, precisely that which is beyond mere mortals to speak of. One way to understand first the Protestant Reformation and then the Enlightenment is as an arrogation of the human ability to speak of God. Religion is no longer a mystical experience: spirit possession becomes mental illness, theology is displaced by philosophy, and through the tools of reason man becomes master of everything in the world *and beyond*. The emergence of negative anthropology could be seen as a re-emergence in academic philosophy and affiliated

[34] Ibid., 336.
[35] Ibid., 12. Geroulanos notes in a footnote an affinity to Adorno's "negative dialectics" that he nonetheless does not wish to elaborate.

intellectual movements of this sort of mystical approach, just now strangely allied with atheism.

Perhaps the point of *Dasein* is that it is untranslatable; or, better, that it is that being which feels the "early morning rays" of Being tickle its face. If, in the course of the nineteenth century, man came to be understood as an animal, with organs, existing in the world, perhaps exemplified by Darwin's view of the human as a species, negative anthropology wants to continue this tradition of centering the human and yet insist on the impossibility of knowing, much less comprehensively describing, human nature. The grammar is borrowed from medieval negative theology (sometimes, like with Heidegger, explicitly; his 1916 Habiliation, after all, was on the John Duns Scotus); but the content remains an atheist anthropology. Yet the negative philosophical anthropology makes this atheism new, because it is no longer a humanism.

I. 4. Heidegger, again

As Geroulanos stresses, the complicated site from which this philosophical doctrine emerges is in the debate over the translation and reception of Heidegger in French. The *locus classicus* for this debate is the 1946 "Letter on Humanism," which Hannah Arendt called Heidegger's *Prachtstück*, "his most splendid effort."[36] While bearing in mind Geroulanos' point about the innovations in French thought, I nonetheless want to read the "Letter" for what it can tell us about negative philosophical anthropology in general, and in particular about the place of language and man, since these are crucial elements of what allows *La pensée sauvage* to come into being in the way it does. In other words, while I remain interested in the intellectual history that Geroulanos traces, in what follows I lean towards a more philosophical (rather than properly historical) discussion of the issue at hand.

[36] Quoted in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From* Being and Time *(1927) to* The Task of Thinking *(1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell, Revised and expanded edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 216.

In the "Letter," Heidegger takes pains to stress that *Dasein* is fundamentally not about *man* but about *Being*. The controversy of the "Letter" centered around what Sartre took to be "existentialist" leanings of *Being and Time*, a reading that Heidegger strenuously objected to, claiming that the French had "anthropologized" his thought. Yet the fact remains that in *Being and Time* Heidegger wrote: "The essence of Dasein lies in its existence"; in German, "Das »Wesen« des Daseins liegt in seiner Existenz" (note the quotation marks omitted in the English translation).[37] It is easy to see how one could misread statements like these as suggesting that Heidegger is proposing a new understanding of human essence, and thus reiterating a humanism, albeit one that identifies "existence" as the essence. For instance, Heidegger could be understood as doing the following. Ordinarily, questions like "Who is that?" are to be answered by description — that is to say, by attributing properties to an essence (e.g. "that substance is mortal" and "that mortal is named Socrates"). Heidegger wants to say that the answer of *who* you are is already given by Being, and that looking into the qualities of particular beings is entirely the wrong way about it. Thus, he writes in the "Letter on Humanism":

> For in the *Who?* or the *What?* we are already on the lookout for something like a person or an object [*Gegenstand*]. But the personal no less than the objective misses and misconstrues the essential unfolding of ek-sistence in the history of Being.[38]

Ek-sistence (whatever that might mean!) is the truth of Being.

Sartre wants to say that by reversing the traditional statement that essence precedes existence, he is making a move *against* metaphysics. After all, Heidegger himself seems to have made precisely this move in *Being and Time*! But in the "Letter on Humanism," written 17 years later, Heidegger says that

> the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement. With it he [Sartre]

[37] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 67; Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 42.
[38] Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 249; Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 327.

> stays with metaphysics in oblivion of the truth of being.[39]

The question for Heidegger remains in what way *he* is not performing a humanism or existentialism like Sartre is. In writing the "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger recognized that there was something to the charge that he was (or could be misunderstood as being) a humanist. That is why Heidegger says:

> But in order that we today may attain to the dimension of the truth of being in order to ponder [*bedenken*] it, we should first of all make clear how being concerns the human being and how it claims him. Such an essential experience happens to us when it dawns on us that man is in that he ek-sists.[40]

In elaborating, Heidegger comes quite close to the language of theology, but remains adamant that he is not willing to embrace it:

> Human beings do not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the clearing of being, come to presence and depart [*an- und abwesen*]. The advent of beings [*Seienden*] lies in the destiny of being [*Seins*]. But for man it is ever a question of finding what is fitting in his essence that corresponds to such destiny; for in accord with this destiny the human being as ek-sisting has to guard the truth of Being. The human being is the shepherd of being. …
>
> Yet being — what is being? It "is" It itself. The thinking that is to come must learn to experience that and to say it. "Being" — that is not God and not a cosmic ground [*Weltgrund*]. Being is essentially farther than all beings and is yet nearer to the human being than every being, be it a rock, a beast, a work of art, a machine, be it an angel or God. Being is the nearest. Yet the near remains farthest from man.[41]

It is statements like these that are, in my view, the best expressions in Heidegger of a negative anthropology. The vocabulary is very much that of negative theology: God, for Christian thinkers like Augustine, is He who is nearest you, your closest companion and confidant, yet also He who is farthest from you, He who cannot be expressed. Being displaces God: but Heidegger struggles to articulate Being, describing it best when describing what it is *not* perhaps because (as Levinas suggests) Being is precisely that which is not, for Being is not a being yet still shines with light of the gods who have now withdrawn from the world.

[39] Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 250; Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 328.
[40] Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 251; Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 329.
[41] Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 252; Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 331.

The problem thus becomes again one of speaking of nothing, or of letting nothing speak by bringing it to the house of Being, language. Heidegger writes:

> The one thing thinking would like to attain and for the first time tries to articulate in *Being and Time* is something simple. As such, being remains mysterious [*geheimnisvoll*], the simple nearness of an unobtrusive prevailing [*unaufdringlichen Waltens*]. The nearness occurs essentially as language itself … But the human being is not only a living creature [*Lebewesen*] who possesses language along with other capacities. Rather, language is the house of being in which the human being ek-sists by dwelling, in that he belongs to the truth of being, guarding it [*Vielmehr ist die Sprache das Haus des Seins, darin wohnend der Mensch eksistiert, indem er der Wahrheit des Seins, sie hütend, gehört*].[42]

In a profound way, then, to think about Being is to think about language, for thinking is precisely the guarding of Being within its house, language.

Again, the similarities with Wittgenstein are striking. For both Heidegger and Wittgenstein, their earlier works of the 1920s stressed the importance of silence, of nothing (in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Was ist Metaphysik?*); their later works (the "Letter on Humanism" and the *Philosophical Investigations* were both completed in 1946) do not so much move away from this prior concern as much as they move to name it in and through language. Thus, Wittgenstein famously remarked that, in contrast to "the philosophers, … what *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."[43] Heidegger will go so far as to say that all true thinking (again, in contrast with "thinking on the model of scientific knowledge and its research projects," which "has its world-historical prestige under the name 'philosophy'") just is the bringing of thought to language, that most ordinary of acts:

> For thinking in its saying merely brings the unspoken word of being to language.
> The usage "bring to language" employed here is now to be taken quite literally. Being comes, clearing itself, to language. It is perpetually under way to language. Such arriving in its turn brings ek-sisting thought to language in a saying. Thus language itself is raised into the clearing of being. Language thus *is* only in this mysterious and yet for us always pervasive way.[44]

[42] Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 253–54; Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 333.
[43] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 116.
[44] Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 274; Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 361–62.

Man does not control language: it constructs the humanity of man, because language is the house of Being. Thinking, *la pensée*, merely brings Being to language. What else will Lévi-Strauss say but that? Is he not just about to bring thought, wild thought (*wilde Denken*, *pensée sauvage*) to language, namely into the system of signs that Saussure had invented?

Ultimately, for Geroulanos, the "Letter on Humanism" signals a renewal of Heidegger's place in French thought because of its elaboration of a negative anthropology. This is an anthropology that explicitly denies its "anthropologization"; as we have seen, Heidegger argues strenuously against any understanding of his work as "humanist." As Geroulanos puts it:

> Well beyond the late 1940s debate, one core argument is inescapable: for Heidegger, it is not man who possesses *Dasein*; it is *Dasein* that contains and makes possible the derivative problem of the human. Heidegger's case, and that of his French readers, is exemplary of the way in which the question of man becomes displaced and rendered subservient to other forms of questioning.[45]

The outcome, what Geroulanos says is most characteristic of negative anthropology, is a refusal of the possibility of answering Kant's question "What is Man?" This question, by the time Levinas is writing in France in 1956 (ten years after the "Letter on Humanism"),

> cannot be given a lasting, comprehensive, transcendental answer. In this sense, the human in man comes to mean less and less: we can only know what he is not, what others and other things are, what his approach to them can reveal.[46]

However, this is not to say that the *problematic* of philosophical anthropology is denied a place. We might remember that Foucault's complementary thesis (written in 1961 alongside his *Folie et Déraison : histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*) was, after all, a translation of and introduction to Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.[47] Yet now, in the wake

[45] Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, 18.
[46] Ibid.
[47] See Michel Foucault, *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology*, ed. and trans. Roberto Nigro, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008).

of the French Heidegger, the Kantian question can only be approached from the side, if at all, "only in terms of *results* or even *side-effects* of an analysis of language, existence, history."[48]

This is the central underpinning of the suite of works that are published in the 1960s that come to be called "structuralist" (Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Derrida): that man

> finds himself thrown in the world of phenomena and life; he is not grounded in some transcendental fashion. … In language, he is an interpreter, conduit, and enunciator of signs and symbols that form part of greater systems independent of his individual will, choices, and existence …; historically, he is constructed and operates within cultural, religious and philosophical limits imposed on him … In each of these systems, he does not grant meaning to reality, language, history being, and society; he finds his own role and status produced and located by the way they construct his interaction with the world and with other beings.[49]

In particular, this kind of negative philosophical anthropology is the central prerequisite for Lévi-Strauss' work *La pensée sauvage*, that is for a view of the human sciences whose task is "not to constitute man, but to dissolve him," for "the idea of a general humanity that is the result of ethnographic reduction will no longer have any relation to the one we formerly held."[50] Lévi-Strauss, like Heidegger, after all, takes issue with Sartre's existentialism. He borrows from the earlier ingredients of antihumanism and negative philosophical anthropology to constitute an anthropology as a human science whose subject, human, is dissolved. In the next section, I turn to read Lévi-Strauss within this context. While bearing in mind the elaboration from "negative anthropology" we have developed above through reading Levinas and Heidegger with Geroulanos, I propose that Lévi-Strauss nonetheless offers a *positive* anthropology. In the next section, we will see what this means and how it comes to be.

[48] Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, 17.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought*, 281–82.

II. Positive anthropology, or Lévi-Strauss on language, image, science

Alongside the philosophical tradition of anthropology that Geroulanos alludes to, there emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a discipline called "anthropology." To put it schematically: this field came into existence on the one hand through ethnology, i.e. the description and comparative analysis of cultures or "races," and on the other hand along with other social sciences, many of them explicitly modeled on or at least thought through the pattern laid by Auguste Comte. A history of anthropology can be and has been told in internalist terms.[51] In this view, its origins are traced to an "evolutionist" approach to magic and kinship across times and places by people like Tylor and Frazer. There then comes, on one side of the Atlantic, a "revolution" through Bronislaw Malinowski's insistence on fieldwork; and, across the pond, Franz Boas' definition of the "culture-concept" as a substitute for race. Boas further defined anthropology as a science comprised of four fields that wedded cultural description to physical (biological) science, linguistics, and archaeology to propose a nomothetic social science of culture. Throughout, a story must be told about this science's complicated entanglement throughout its history with European empire and colonialism, not to mention the history of race and "scientific racism." This is not just a story of complicity: throughout this period, the affiliation with colonialism and racism produced varying reactions, which really came to a crisis during and after the 1960s (coinciding with a wave of formal decolonization).[52] This led eventually to the practice today, since about the 1980s or 90s, of a "critical" anthropology that has taken on board various

[51] See, e.g., Adam Kuper, *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The British School in the Twentieth Century*, Fourth edition (London: Routledge, 2015); Sherry B. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (1984): 126–66. Both Ortner and Kuper are prominent anthropologists in their own right, and rely on personal observations and experience for their accounts. For a more distanced account by a professional historian, see the work of George Stocking, e.g. George W. Stocking, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888-1951* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology: With a New Preface* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). I draw on these texts for the necessarily brief outline history of the discipline in this section.

[52] On this point see further Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973).

doses of philosophy and literary and cultural theory (not least "French Theory," and among that perhaps most importantly Foucault).

But that is getting ahead of ourselves. For now, I want to focus on a work at the cusp, a work that was profoundly influenced by all these developments and profoundly influential on subsequent anthropology, yet also a work that has perhaps still not been received, at least in the English-speaking world: Lévi-Strauss' *La pensée sauvage*. This is a work written by a trained philosopher who also did ethnographic "fieldwork," and thus was well aware of many of the previous "scientific" connotations of "anthropology." It is also a work that is taken as exemplary of "structuralism" (perhaps already part of what came to be known as "poststructuralism"); as Frédéric Keck reminds us, *La pensée sauvage* (1962) was quickly followed by Althusser's *Pour Marx* (1965), Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* (1966), Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (1967), and Deleuze's *Logique du sens* (1969).[53] Let us begin with Lévi-Strauss' title, whose contested translation into English Keck says itself "constitutes an ethnologically interesting case of misunderstanding between cultural traditions."[54] To give an account of the title's various (mis)translations is therefore not a bad way into the subject of the book, which is precisely those "ethnologically interesting cases" of languages and cultures and the transformations and misunderstandings between them.

II. 1. A problematic title

La pensée sauvage was first translated into English in 1966 as *The Savage Mind* by Sybil Wolfram, an Oxford-trained philosopher (and student of P. F. Strawson). For English readers, this title carries unmistakable echoes of 19th-century evolutionist thinkers who we nowadays find to be, by and large, execrable: Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer, most notably. These

[53] Frédéric Keck, *Lévi-Strauss et la pensée sauvage*, Philosophies 179 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2004), 9.
[54] "La traduction … constitue un cas ethnologiquement intéressant de malentendu entre des traditions culturelles." Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Oeuvres*, ed. Frédéric Keck, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 543 (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

are (and should be) uncomfortable associations for many reader of Lévi-Strauss in English. Yet, as John Leavitt notes,

> the French title certainly contains echoes of these authors, as well as of Lévy-Bruhl (*La mentalité primitive*), so that the translation *The Savage Mind* is not inaccurate. In fact, it was proposed as an option by Lévi-Strauss himself … But the French has a lot more going on. First of all, *pensée* is not usually translated into English as "mind," but rather as "thought" … And while *sauvage* in French can be translated as "savage" in English, in the sense of "uncivilized" and the related sense of extremely angry and expressive about it, the more usual translation would be "wild" or "untamed": etymologically, it comes from Latin *silvaticus*, "of the forest." It is the usual term for animal and plant species that have not been domesticated. So the most evident meaning for *pensée sauvage* is something like "undomesticated thought"; the German translation of the book is titled *Wilde Denken*. … This is why the new translation is called *Wild Thought*: the whole point is that what the modern West has labeled primitive and savage is in fact nothing but ordinary human thinking when allowed to follow its natural bent, what Lévi-Strauss calls the science of the concrete.[55]

The question this debate over the translation of the title poses is whether the study of *pensée* is a science, and if so of what sort. Of course, that question itself begs the question of what "science" is, itself an interesting case of mistranslations that I wish to bracket for the moment. We could instead ask what sort of knowledge Lévi-Strauss proposes to enact with respect to *pensée sauvage*, and perhaps in particular what would make this knowledge more or less systematic and universally valid, two features we might identify as "scientific."

We should remember that these are problems of translation not just between languages, but also between disciplines and in general modes of thinking. In particular, the 1966 translation exemplifies the gulf at the time between Anglophone philosophy (especially Oxford-based Ordinary Language Philosophy) and French and German philosophy (especially phenomenology and structuralism, colored to various extents by Western Marxism and other currents such as Freudian psychoanalysis). That is not to say that these movements do not have important points of contact; indeed, one could say that the book's central concern with language expresses precisely one of these common interests. *La pensée sauvage* is concerned with how meaning is made and translated and what the status of

[55] Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought*, xvi.

thought is with respect to it. As we have seen, this is the question that was central to Heidegger and, in different ways, to Wittgenstein: what it means to bring thought to language.

For Lévi-Strauss, in particular, thought is *sauvage*, wild, undomesticated, fully comprehensible within a system/structure and yet always already exceeding it. The work of *La pensée sauvage* is to bring wild thought to language. In the words of Frédéric Keck, introducing *La pensée sauvage*:

> Reading Lévi-Strauss poses a problem for philosophy. Born in 1908, Claude Lévi-Strauss passed his *agrégation* in philosophy in 1932, but made a clean break with philosophy when he left for Brazil in 1935 to begin there an ethnological project, the consequences of which were felt throughout the rest of his career as an anthropologist.[56]

One could name this problem that is at once philosophical and anthropological in the words of Heidegger's essay: *Was heißt Denken?* What calls for thinking, or what do we call "thinking"? In a way, Lévi-Strauss enacts the Heideggerian move to lament the philosophical tradition for forgetting what thought truly means. Lévi-Strauss does not entertain the question of thought via an inquiry into a thinking thing (Descartes' *res cogito*) nor by looking into some *a priori* structures of thought, like Kant, whether those structures are understood as psychological, transcendental, or linguistic. Neither does Lévi-Strauss follow a "scientific" path as established by earlier evolutionist anthropologists, which would reduce wild thought to a mind, i.e. a brain shaped by its environment. Nor does Lévi-Strauss comfortably fall into later hermeneutical approaches to "culture" that would make the *mentalité primitive* a system of signs.[57] Instead, Lévi-Strauss returns to *thought in the wild* (or, we might want to say with Heidegger, Lévi-Strauss returns thought *to* the wild, from where it always already comes).

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[56] "Lire Lévi-Strauss pose problème pour la philosophie. Né en 1908, Claude Lévi-Strauss a passé l'agrégation de philosophie en 1932, mais il a nettement rompu avec la philosophie en partant au Brésil en 1935 pour y commencer un travail d'ethnologie dont tout le reste de sa carrière d'anthropologue a tiré les conséquences." Keck, *Lévi-Strauss et la pensée sauvage*, 1. Here, as in the other quotes by Keck for which no English translation exists, the translation from the French is mine.

[57] As Geertz, for instance, entertains in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

Like Being, which shone its rays to the Greeks, but whose warmth was forgotten in the course of many centuries of modernization and obfuscation, Lévi-Strauss identifies this *thought in the wild* at the status of the primitive. To put it simply: the Parisian philosopher left the university and entered the forests of the Amazon and found there *thinking*. *La pensée sauvage* is a series of remarks on this encounter.

II. 2. The conventional reading

What might interest us today in Lévi-Strauss' encounter with *pensée sauvage*? I argue that Lévi-Strauss offers, via a reading of Auguste Comte, an image of knowledge that recuperates but does not reiterate positivism and logic, and in so doing thinks its way through the problem of negative philosophical anthropology in an alternative to Heidegger's *Destruktion* of anthropology. In short, Lévi-Strauss offers a *positive* vision of anthropology that nonetheless fully reckons with the *negative* anthropology we have previously elaborated.

This is not how Lévi-Strauss is typically read. In the terms of his own intellectual trajectory, *La pensée sauvage* is often understood as an intermediary work between Lévi-Strauss's earlier work on kinship and his later work on myth. Indeed, in *Le cru et le cuit* (translated as *The Raw and the Cooked*, the first volume of a tetralogy known as *Mythologiques*), Lévi-Strauss says:

> The fact is, however, that *La pensée sauvage* represented a kind of pause in the development of my theories: I felt the need for a break between two bursts of effort [*il nous fallait reprendre souffle entre deux efforts*, literally "we had to take a breath between two efforts"]. It is true that I took advantage of the situation to scan the scene before me [*embrasser du regard le panorama étalé devant nous*], to estimate the ground covered [*le trajet parcouru*], to map out my future itinerary, and to get a rough idea of the foreign territories I would have to cross, even though I was determined never to deviate for any length of time from my allotted path and — apart from some minor poaching — never to encroach on the only too closely guarded preserves of philosophy.[58]

[58] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 9; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1964), 17–18. Contrast Heidegger, who speaks of his *Holzwege*, those "paths, mostly overgrown, that come to an abrupt stop where the wood is untrodden." Rather unlike Lévi-Strauss, Heidegger is more than happy to indulge in hunting, and he considers it his duty as a philosopher to follow these paths in the woods wherever they may lead. Martin Heidegger, *Off the*

In particular, *La pensée sauvage* is often understood as an attempt by Lévi-Strauss to take the logic of signs he had adopted from Saussure and apply it first to the case of the exchange of wives in a kinship system and then to a rich variety of ethnographic contexts.

This is where the story can be linked up with broader French intellectual history. Structuralism represents a kind of response to what anthropology can be in an intellectual climate that is hostile to any stable idea of *anthropos*. Many people draw analogies between Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, whose first great work, *Folie et déraison : histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (translated as *History of Madness*), was written in the same year as *La pensée sauvage*, 1961.[59] Both offered new models of the human sciences whose task, as Lévi-Strauss put it (and as Foucault later quoted him) was now "not to constitute man, but to dissolve him."[60] Foucault and Lévi-Strauss did so, we might say, by turning to discourse and semiotics. They did so in alignment with a larger "linguistic turn" in philosophy, responding as much to Heidegger's insistence in the "Letter on Humanism" that "language is the house of Being" as to the work of late Wittgenstein and Austin and their uptake in Anglophone contexts. It is worth remembering, for instance, that Lévi-Strauss first encountered Saussure's work through contact with Roman Jakobson when they both found themselves in New York having fled the Nazis during the Second World War; it is Saussure who provided the model *par excellence* of a social science that can turn the merely descriptive study of language into the nomothetic science of linguistics, a model Lévi-Strauss could be understood as following

Beaten Track, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), v; Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm Herrmann, 2., unveränderte Auflage, Gesamtausgabe, Band 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2003).

[59] The publication and translation history of Foucault's text is fraught, partly because of precisely these evolving debates over the human sciences and (post)structuralism in 1960s France. See the introduction by Jean Khalfa in Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[60] Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought*, 281. Quoted in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1970), 413. Foucault goes on to say: "In relation to the 'human sciences', psychoanalysis and ethnology are rather 'counter-sciences'; which does not mean that they are less 'rational' or 'objective' than the others, but that they flow in the opposite direction, that they lead them back to their epistemological basis, and that they ceaselessly 'unmake' that very man who is creating and re-creating his positivity in the human sciences."

when it comes to anthropology, exchanging "langue" for "culture" and "parole" for "practices." Thus understood on the one hand as a staging point in Lévi-Strauss' career and on the other hand as exemplary of a linguistic turn in French philosophy in the 1950s and 60s, we can read *La pensée sauvage* primarily for its semiotics, for the way in which it *elaborates* a "negative philosophical anthropology" by recourse to linguistics and sign systems — and in so doing, how Lévi-Strauss gave a model of how anthropology could be a science (not just a descriptive project of ethnology) through structuralism.

III. 3. Comte

But I want to focus on an aspect of the text that is less often considered than Lévi-Strauss' recuperation of Saussure: his reading of Comte. To be fair, part of the reason less attention has been paid to Lévi-Strauss' relationship with Comte is that his views changed significantly in subsequent editions of *La pensée sauvage*. The crucial additions found in chapters 1, 8, and 9 were only added in 2005–06 and published in the 2008 edition of Lévi-Strauss' *Oeuvres* in the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* (a rare distinction for a living author; Lévi-Strauss passed away one year after their publication, at the age of 101). These were in turn published for the first time in English in the new 2021 translation that appeared under the title *Wild Thought*. We should bear this complicated timeline in mind when engaging with Lévi-Strauss on Comte. For my purposes, I take the chronology as indicative of a continuing engagement with the problematic of positive and negative anthropology that bridges the intellectual history of France in the 1950s and 60s with present-day concerns in philosophical anthropology.[61]

[61] By "present-day" I mean works since approximately the year 2000. A useful turning point for the beginning of anthropology's "ontological turn" (part of the more broadly designated "new materialisms") could be given by the seminal publication in 1998 by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998): 469–88, https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157. Although, of course, such periodizations are inherently flawed, as the example of Lévi-Strauss' continuing revisions to *La pensée sauvage* make clear.

So, what is the significance of Lévi-Strauss' engagement with Comte? In one sense, we might understand the citations as *de rigueur* for a French social scientist, dutifully following a lineage of their discipline that traces its origins from Comte to Marx to Durkheim and so on. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss had long been familiar with Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive*, having been effectively forced to teach it in São Paulo in the 1930s, even though his preference had been for reading American anthropologists like Robert Lowie and Franz Boas.[62] (Brazil had a strong influence on Lévi-Strauss, being the site of his field research in the Amazon and the home of the Positivist Church of Brazil, founded by two students of Comte's in Rio de Janeiro in 1881.) It was through a chance encounter at a bookseller that Lévi-Strauss came to read the "mature Comte" of the *Système de politique positive* (1851–54) — the Comte who was the founder of the positivist religion, and not just a rebellious disciple of Saint-Simon, as he had been in the 1820s. As a consequence of this reading, Lévi-Strauss' view of Comte changed from a view characterized primarily by stagism (from "theological" to "metaphysical" to "positive" stages of human civilization) and an almost naive belief in progress to realize instead in Comte what Frédéric Keck calls "a true philosophy that comes as close as possible to anthropology, that is to say a philosophy that results from the shock for thought of the encounter of wild societies [*sociétés sauvages*]."[63]

In other words, Comte allows Lévi-Strauss to give philosophical voice to the anthropological encounter, in a way that does not simply reiterate the "negative philosophical

[62] As Thomas Skidmore notes: "Even before reaching Brazil, Lévi-Strauss had turned for his reading on ethnography to American anthropologists, such as Robert Lowie and Franz Boas, who stressed a more empirical approach, especially toward field research. In Brazil, he experienced a negative reaction from the French first-hand. The French organizers of the mission had told him to focus his sociology course on Comte and Durkheim. But a French colleague hearing him teach in Brazil thought him insufficiently loyal to the French masters and tried to force him out. The effort failed, thanks in fact to Braudel's intervention." Thomas E. Skidmore, "Lévi-Strauss, Braudel and Brazil: A Case of Mutual Influence," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 22, no. 3 (2003): 348. See further Marcel Hénaff, *Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Making of Structural Anthropology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 247., who says that in fact "A French colleague in sociology considered him to be too unfaithful to Comte and so attempted to force him to leave."

[63] "Une véritable philosophie au plus près de l'anthropologie, c'est-à-dire résultant du choc pour la pensée de la rencontre des sociétés sauvages." Lévi-Strauss, *Oeuvres*, 1806.

anthropology" pervasive in French thought at the time but rather provides an original response to it. Keck asks the appropriate questions: "What is the significance of the rehabilitation of the founder of positivism by the founder of structuralism? What unity of thought ties together [*relie*] these two paradigms of the human sciences against the psychological philosophy of Cousin or Sartre?"[64] The answer is to be found in a footnote citing Comte that Lévi-Strauss added to the ninth chapter of *La pensée sauvage* in 2005–06. The quotation reads:

> Social phenomena, as human phenomena, are no doubt included among physiological phenomena. But although for this reason social physics must necessarily take its point of departure in individual physiology … it must nevertheless be conceived and cultivated as a wholly distinct science, because of the progressive influence of human generations on one other.[65]

Thus, what distinguishes the social or human sciences from the natural sciences is "the progressive influence of human generations on one other." This influence might be named as a collective thought that transcends the individual (something perhaps resembling *Geist*, as Comte's contemporaries might have named it). But we need not reach for metaphysical Hegelian interpretations to understand what Comte means, and what Lévi-Strauss might have taken from him. Keck suggests that we might understand "progressive influence of generations" to mean that "effect of education which produces originally the human spirit, which cannot be reduced either to biological conditions or to an individual conscience, but is rather the result of socialized action."[66] In other words, Lévi-Strauss takes from Comte a

[64] Ibid.
[65] In the original French: "Les phénomènes sociaux, en tant qu'humains, sont sans doute compris parmi les phénomènes physiologiques. Mais quoique, pour cette raison, la physique sociale doive nécessairement prendre son point de départ dans la physiologie individuelle […] elle n'en doit pas moins être conçue et cultivée comme une science entièrement distincte, à cause de l'influence progressive des générations humaines les unes sur les autres." Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought*, 282; Lévi-Strauss, *Oeuvres*, 824–25. The original source is Auguste Comte, *Considérations philosophiques sur les sciences et les savants* (Paris, 1825), 150, n.1; now available in Auguste Comte, *Écrits de jeunesse 1816–1828: Suivis du Mémoire sur la 'Cosmogonie' de Laplace, 1835*, ed. Paulo Estevão de Berrêdo Carneiro, Archives positivistes, volume 5 (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2018), 335.
[66] "Cette influence des générations, effet de l'éducation, produit originairement l'esprit humain, qui n'est réductible ni à des conditions biologiques ni à une conscience individuelle, mais résulte plutôt de l'action socialisée." Lévi-Strauss, *Oeuvres*, 1807.

conception of human action across generations that eludes naturalism on the one hand (which would take human actions to be just part of biological conditioning) and philosophical psychology on the other (which would take actions to be ultimately part of the mind, whether singular or collective). Thought, for Lévi-Strauss, exceeds domestication by either philosophy or science.

This inheritance of positivism might prompt one to ask, as Keck does: "Does this mean that structuralism shares the positivist conception according to which all historical phenomena can be totalized through the form of science?" Again, no. Lévi-Strauss takes the idea of historical development and the conception of a system from Comte, but does not take *progress* with him as well. As Keck puts it:

> The "process" of knowledge is not a "progress": it unfolds [*il se déroule*] on several levels at the same time, through a set of conflictual relations that do not find their resolution anywhere, but only move at more and more abstract levels of thought [*à travers un ensemble de rapports conflictuels qui ne trouvent nulle part leur résolution, mais se déplacent seulement à des niveaux de plus en plus abstraits de la pensée*].[67]

Perhaps this is why Lévi-Strauss prefers to speak of the *sauvage* instead of the *primitive*; the *sauvage* is wild, beyond reason, undomesticated. It is in a sense originary, like the primitive, but it is better understood as eluding capture by logics of progress. It is indeed in conflict with reason, with modernity, but this conflict is not resolved, whether positively or negatively: it is merely displaced into thought.

But this does not quite answer the question at hand: does Lévi-Strauss adopt any philosophy of history at all? If he does not take on an idea of progress from Comte (who himself adopted it from Kant and early post-Kantian philosophy), does that mean that for Lévi-Strauss history is nothing but a series of chaotic events? In Keck's view, Lévi-Strauss "replaces philosophy of history, which describes the passage from a practical subject to a knowing subject, with philosophy of nature, the ensemble of objective relations of which the

[67] Ibid.

human subject is solely one of the points of passage."[68] But this in turn is merely one manifestation of Lévi-Strauss' larger inversion of Comte, and by extension of the broader post-Kantian philosophical tradition. As Keck puts it, Lévi-Strauss

> does not begin with a 'subjective synthesis' to move towards an 'objective synthesis,' but on the contrary [begins with] an objective knowledge of the world of which the subject is only an effect, [to move towards] a knowledge that is equally objective and aims essentially to satisfy the needs of the subject's performance.[69]

It is in this way, I think, that Lévi-Strauss departs from Hegel, too: despite describing the "unfolding" (*déroulement*, *Entfaltung*) of ideas in reality across time, Lévi-Strauss does not subscribe to Hegel's progressive philosophy of history that pivots on the development (*Bildung*) of a subject, but rather *begins* with objective knowledge of the world to move toward knowledge that is equally objective. In short, even as Lévi-Strauss takes up the *form* of Kant's anthropology, he undoes the *content* of its development into nineteenth-century humanism.[70] In this way, Lévi-Strauss is explicitly positioning himself within the French intellectual movements of "negative philosophical anthropology" and "antihumanism" that we identified previously. Indeed, the same chapter where Lévi-Strauss takes up Comte is the chapter where he attacks Sartre for his humanism.

But what, finally, is the goal of "dissolving" the human into structure? Does Lévi-Strauss' structuralism, the culmination of negative anthropology, in fact render a *positive*

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[68] "Lévi-Strauss remplace donc la philosophie de l'histoire, qui décrit le passage du sujet pratique au sujet connaissant, par une philosophie de la nature, ensemble de relations objectives dont le sujet humain est seulement l'un des points de passage." Keck, *Lévi-Strauss et la pensée sauvage*, 83.

[69] "Le schéma que propose Lévi-Strauss est radicalement inverse : il ne commence pas par une « synthèse subjective » pour aller vers une « synthèse objective », mais au contraire par une connaissance objective du monde dont le sujet est seulement un effet, à une connaissance tout aussi objective qui vise essentiellement à satisfaire les besoins de rendement du sujet." Ibid., 83.

[70] Vaccarino Bremner writes that Foucault was making the same move with respect to Kant, at precisely the same time, in his Foucault, *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology*. As she writes: "It might appear curious why Foucault would supplant the 'death of man' with the apparent smuggling-in of a different kind of subject – the 'overman'. But we have begun to see what Foucault's motivations for doing so consist in. The *pragmatic subject*, whose practical, reflexively oriented task is to 'make something of herself' and 'think for herself', is what remains once the transcendental-empirical confusion of the subject as object of theoretical knowledge has been rejected as unsound. Thus, while the specific *content* of anthropology – its appeal to a determinate and universal human nature – is rejected as historical, empirical and socially situated (and thus contingent), it retains its 'pragmatic', practical and reflexive, *form*." Vaccarino Bremner, "Anthropology as Critique," 348. Italics in original.

anthropology impossible? I do not think so. In fact, I believe Lévi-Strauss would say that his negative anthropology allows for a more radical humanism, one that can account for the true diversity of human cultural phenomena. In other words, Lévi-Strauss offers a positive anthropology.

In this respect, we can usefully contrast Lévi-Strauss' project with Heidegger's. Geroulanos suggests that

> the "Letter" could be read as an exercise in an alternative anthropology — a *Destruktion*, in Heidegger's term, of anthropology's history and scope. … In other words, while Heidegger cannot be said to remain within the paradigm of anthropology, he by no means denies 'the human': he keeps it suspended and thinkable, if only indirectly.[71]

Lévi-Strauss, in a way, takes up Heidegger's own discovery of positivity within negativity — the way in which even as the human is erased and dissolved, he is made central again through *Dasein*. The late Heidegger would take a romantic turn, after reading Nietzsche and Hölderlin, in short the German Romantic tradition, to stress the poietic capacity of *Dasein*. Lévi-Strauss takes a different route, veering away from the philosophical and cultural movements of early-nineteenth-century Germany, that is in my view more productive. Through a return to Comte, Lévi-Strauss makes the space for an anthropology that can produce something positive from within the negative, something akin to knowledge but without the "god-trick."

III. Thinking anthropology today, or Philippe Descola, Donna Haraway, and the legacy of "the human"

As fertile as Lévi-Strauss is, I think there is only so much to be read into *La pensée sauvage*. But there are many others who continue to turn the ground he prepared in anthropology today. For instance, we might call Philippe Descola, Eduardo Kohn, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro the three musketeers of the "ontological turn" in anthropology

[71] Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, 244.

today. All three are deeply indebted to Lévi-Strauss. To name just a few ways in which this is apparent: they have all worked in Amazonia; they all think adeptly with both philosophy and anthropology; and they both center in some way the encounter with an other as wild thought in some way. Perhaps more significantly, they are all centrally interested in bringing wild thought *to* language, and therefore thinking through what might disrupt semiosis as traditionally understood.[72] I want to read Descola to indicate the ways in which Lévi-Strauss' problematics continue today, and to lead us into some questions that thinking calls for today — not least the intertwined questions of decolonization and the status of knowledge/science. These questions will lead us back to Hannah Arendt, through Donna Haraway on questions of situated knowledges, embodied practices, and moral-political action.

III. 1. Descola

Philippe Descola is most useful to begin with because he essentially continues where his teacher, Lévi-Strauss, left off. Descola writes usefully about his intellectual autobiography:

> As was quite common at the time, my theoretical outlook was an improbable mixture of Gallic Marxism, semiotics, Husserlian phenomenology, and Lévi-Straussian structuralism, with small pinches of Sahlins, Douglas, Leach, and more exotic authors such as Georges-André Haudricourt, Gilbert Simondon, or Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen.[73]

He would come to work in Paris with Lévi-Strauss, and in the process adopt structuralism as a guiding methodology. For him, "structural analysis in anthropology … reveals and orders contrastive features so as to discover the necessary relations organizing certain sectors of social life, such as the set of culinary techniques or of the ways to exchange potential spouses

[72] The most notable works by these three authors are Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Pub., 2014); Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
[73] Philippe Descola, "Transformation Transformed," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 3 (December 2016): 34, https://doi.org/10.14318/hau6.3.005.

between individuals and groups."[74] Importantly, Descola says, this structural analysis operates at a level he calls (borrowing from Husserl) "antepredicative," that is "the one where humans and nonhumans become aware of each other and develop modes of relating prior to the usual processes of categorization and communication embedded in historically and linguistically contingent frameworks." For Descola, this *level* at which structuralism operates is crucial, for it affords the possibility of a "symmetrization" that no other method affords. By "symmetrization" Descola means "an attempt, proper to anthropology and one of its main claims to distinction, to render compatible on an equal footing the cultural features of the observer and those of the observed."[75] In other words, structuralism properly understood stresses how the anthropologist is not a rational European going out into the world to study primitive minds or savage cultures; instead, anthropology is a science that deals with undomesticated thought.

What Descola offers as an innovation over Levi-Strauss is to question the opposition between nature and culture by recognizing that this opposition itself is a structural feature of thought. That is to say, ontology — what counts as a "natural," elemental building block of the world — is as much subject to structural analysis as is kinship, taboos, or eating habits. But again, the method in all these cases is not one of mere description (although, in the form of ethnography, description does contribute significantly to the science of anthropology). Instead, Descola says, his method is to work through his object and "the logic of its contrasts."[76]

What Descola takes up is the project of "positive science" *after* negative anthropology. He offers a clear articulation of Lévi-Strauss' structuralism as for him the most cogent approach to ontological-semiotic frameworks. For Descola and his readers, as for

[74] Ibid., 35.
[75] Ibid., 41.
[76] Ibid., 37.

many other anthropologists today, anthropology is inscribed as both science and critique, both an operation of knowledge and a site of its destabilization — in other words, anthropology today is at once *positive* and *negative*. He continues his mentor's project of taking seriously *la pensée sauvage*, and doing so via a method that is both in some sense scientific and committed to destabilizing science by naming it as "naturalism," just another mode of structuring the world ontologically.

For Descola, naturalism is placed alongside totemism, animism, and analogism as one of the four ways in which the world is structured ontologically. This matrix is, again, not meant to be a totalizing scientific framework. As Descola writes:

> However, the matrix of identification does not work as a philosophical prime mover; rather it functions as a sort of experimental device that allows me to capture — thus to bring to existence — and to classify — thus to combine — certain phenomena to highlight the syntax of their differences. … For if I gave the ontological matrix a fundamental position, on the other hand, none of the variants that it allows (animism, naturalism, totemism, analogism) and none of the variants detectable in other systems, which are as many transformations of the matrix … can claim to predominate over any other variants. This was a requirement which I had set myself from the start so as to produce a model of intelligibility of social and cultural facts that would remain as neutral as possible in relation to our own ontology, naturalism. And this is why naturalism is only one of the four ontological variants in the matrix. Structuralism in general thus provides the fairest form of symmetrization that anthropology can afford.[77]

What is at stake for Descola in this question of method is a neutrality of perspective, what he calls symmetrization, which is crucially caught up with political questions of decolonizing knowledge by dislodging Western modes of thinking as natural.

What Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo Kohn, and others in the "ontological turn" share in common is a desire to take seriously the thought-systems of their interlocutors, and in so doing disrupt the taken-for-granted thought of Western scientific modernity, which Descola names "naturalism." Furthermore, these figures also generally share some kind of political concerns for (a) decolonization and indigenous rights and (b) environmental justice. There are

[77] Ibid., 41–42.

divergences, though: in particular, over the question of whether their work is invested in some kind of subjectivism (as seems to be implied especially by Viveiros de Castro's development of "perspectivism"), and therefore ultimately whether they are willing to take the radical ontological step of asserting that there is no common reality — or if not that, then in what sense exactly the "turn" could be said to be "ontological." Descola himself marks a self-conscious departure from this kind of "perspectivism":

> Another form of symmetrization is to transform an account of a native way of thinking into a more or less systematized corpus similar to a philosophical doctrine, at least in its mode of presentation. This is also an ancient tendency in the West, and one that even predates the former type of symmetrization, since it has been a characteristic feature over several centuries of a certain type of missionary anthropology. More recent cases are the famous *Philosophie bantoue* of Father Placide Tempels (1945), which triggered a heated debate among African philosophers, or even Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's latest version of perspectivism (2014). All these forms of symmetrization are wanting for reasons that it would take too long to develop here, but the cardinal one is that they remain an idiosyncratic exegesis which upsets, and bypasses, the pragmatic conditions of utterance and of reception of the propositions which reputedly provide the operationality of the practice or norm transformed into an analytical concept or a philosophical doctrine.[78]

I think Descola's concern about perspectivism is well-taken. A "philosophy" cannot, of course, be unproblematically developed from any single set of statements. Language cannot be unproblematically translated into thought.

However, a critique could be and has been leveled at Descola, saying in essence that because of his fear of avoiding radical subjectivism, he inevitably reproduces a harmful "objectivity" that assumes the gaze of God. In short: just because perspectivism is *difficult*, for well-taken reasons, does not mean it should not be undertaken. In its most radical form, we could cite Zoe Todd's critique that "'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism": in essence, that scholars like Descola and Viveiros de Castro ultimately end up reiterating a colonial encounter of the white male European with the indigenous Other, because they

[78] Ibid., 42. For further discussion of Descola and Viveiros de Castro, see Bruno Latour, "Perspectivism: 'Type' or 'Bomb'?," *Anthropology Today* 25, no. 2 (2009): 1–2, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8322.2009.00652.x.

inevitably take indigenous knowledge and capitalize on it in the form of their own theories.[79] The question, from Lévi-Strauss to Descola today, remains how to take seriously the thought of others, wild thought, without disciplining it and reproducing some kind of divine prerogative.

Descola, to his credit, acknowledges the force of these critiques.[80] He writes in reply:

> Because, in accordance with standard structuralist procedure, the totalization is never given *ab initio*, as the starting point from which the Sirius of anthropology might structure the world under his imperial gaze, but results from the always uncompleted operation by the means of which cultural features, norms, institutions, qualities, propositions, are constituted as variants of one another within a set … this type of symmetrization is in no way claiming a universalist position of detachment; for it is entirely dependent upon the multiple properties that people detect here and there in phenomena, and it thus requires nothing more in terms of an overhanging epistemic point of view than acquiring some knowledge on the diversity of the objects one deals with, a modest claim for what is after all a scholarly undertaking.[81]

In short, structuralism for Descola allows you to have your cake and eat it too: to make antihumanist critiques, articulated via an inheritance of negative anthropology, while nonetheless persisting in some kind of anthropology as positive science, and thus to work with indigenous perspectives in a philosophically serious way, without reiterating the "god-trick" of the "view from nowhere." All this science entails, Descola would have us believe, is a modest compiling of knowledge. This means (1) being committed to fieldwork, to some kind of scientific project that involves ethnography in the Amazon (thus continuing to take seriously "the thought of savages"); and (2) allowing this thought to destabilize, while nonetheless structuring, thought *tout court*. In other words, Descola wants to insist with Lévi-Strauss that some kind of comparitivism in anthropology is not only possible but necessary, without reproducing old colonial violences of anthropology as science.

[79] See Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2016): 4–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124.
[80] Descola discussed the force of these critiques, and his relationship with other contemporary anthropologists, in oral remarks given at a seminar at the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, on 21 April 2023, to which I participated.
[81] Descola, "Transformation Transformed," 41.

III. 2. Haraway

A different way to approach the politics of knowledge is through feminist science studies. The question posed by negative philosophical anthropology and taken up in different ways by Lévi-Strauss and Descola is the problem of the view from nowhere and its inverse, the always-already-situated view from somewhere. These are the stakes of positive and negative anthropology today, the legacy of Heidegger filtered through French thought, with which thinking today ought to reckon.

I want to turn for a moment to Donna Haraway's seminal 1988 article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," as a particularly clear articulation of the stakes of "negative philosophical anthropology" today. Haraway writes:

> I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation. This gaze signifies the unmarked positions of Man and White, one of the many nasty tones of the word "objectivity" to feminist ears in scientific and technological, late-industrial, militarized, racist, and male-dominant societies, that is, here, in the belly of the monster, in the United States in the late 1980s. I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*.[82]

One could articulate Haraway's argument in the terms of another case of (mis)translation of Heidegger, and more significantly of the French development of negative anthropology. The tropes are there: first, Haraway identifies first the old humanist move of Man appropriating the "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere," what she calls a "fantastic, distorted, and irrational" arrogation of divinity that makes Man in the model of the Christian God, thereby rendering the old divine indifference into the violent objectivity of modern technoscience.

[82] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066. Italics in original.

Then, Haraway makes points that can be articulated as antihumanist and involving a negative philosophical anthropology: first, there is the general suspicion of modern narratives of progress, especially those that would position the United States as uniquely enlightened; and second, Haraway insists that the human is *not* to be made in the image of God, but is nonetheless still philosophically central. After all, her call is for *situated knowledges*. She even uses structuralist tropes (like the "dichotomous chart" on p. 588) in order to map out the terrain as she sees it.

Haraway goes on to write clearly and persuasively for the kind of epistemology she thinks is necessary:

> I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. Only the god trick is forbidden.[83]

In short, we could say with Geroulanos that Haraway gives voice to an atheism that is not a humanism. In one sense, the human as body is made absolutely central; but the claim is not that secularization did not go far enough, but that the grammar of divine knowledge is basically inappropriate for politics and epistemology today. We can further articulate this point on the level of intellectual history. There are, indeed, explicit transfers and references: Bruno Latour is cited by Haraway as an ally, if an unlikely feminist, and we know his heritage in French philosophy and anthropology. Haraway also makes explicit the commonalities (and divergences) between her project and the contestation within American anthropology over the (im)possibility of comparative knowledge, but names that what is crucially at stake for feminists at least in these debates is not comparativism per se but rather "the pattern of relationships between and within bodies and language."[84]

[83] Ibid., 589.
[84] See the footnotes in Ibid., 596–97.

Yet I want to insist that Haraway, who I take to be exemplary of the best American reception of "negative philosophical anthropology," is not just a passive receiver of "the latest and greatest" from French philosophy. There may be (I think there are) questions of misunderstanding: of Foucault, of Heidegger, of Lévi-Strauss. Yet what Geroulanos told us about "human reality" and Heidegger in France in the 1930s is instructive for an intellectual history of American thought today, too. Corbin's choice of *réalité humaine* to translate *Dasein* probably was indeed a distortion of the point. Sartre probably was wrong about *Being and Time*. But ultimately, these are thoughts in motion: the French in the 30s, 40s, and 50s were making interventions driven not just by the "correctness" of readings of foreign philosophers but, of course, by their very own social and cultural context. To speak with Haraway's point, their bodies were involved in the production of knowledge. In 1988, Haraway was making her own intervention, not just translating some French master thinker into American English. In short, she, like we, is both constituted by her history and culture and thinking *from* and *through* these circumstances to something not entirely reducible to them. Haraway, like all of us, is (as Kant would put it) at once cognizer, agent, and constituted by her circumstances.

Conclusion

What is it to learn to think with, or from, others? Is it to derive or to make doctrine the thought of an other? Or is the threat of wild thought not that of madness (*folie*, or as Foucault called it, "unreason," *déraison*), and thus the defeat of thought altogether? The challenge of thinking is found as much in the encounter of "savage societies," that is people not always already caught in the web of modern reason, as in those most eminently "reasonable" of creatures: philosophers. It was Wittgenstein who wrote:

> When we do philosophy we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from

> it.[85]

What might this mean? How are philosophers like savages and savages like philosophers? Return, if you will, to the frontispiece Lévi-Strauss chose for his book, a drawing of a wildflower that I have also included as the frontispiece of this thesis. It depicts the flower known in Latin as the *Viola tricolor*, in English as the "pansy," and in French as the "*pensée*." This image is, quite literally, of a wild thought. Consider also the quotation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that Lévi-Strauss added (in English!) as an epigraph to the last edition of *La pensée sauvage*. Ophelia, in her madness, in the last scene in which she appears, names plants that offer solace, plants that were known for their capacity to ease pain. And then she says: "… and there is pansies, that's for thoughts." The question is what thinking, wild thinking, does.

In a late essay, "Heidegger at Eighty," Arendt reflected on what it means to think with and after Heidegger — the theme that has been, in a certain sense, the background for this thesis. For what is "negative philosophical anthropology" if not a philosophy prodded by, prompted by, thought in and around and about and through, Heidegger? Note that this is not quite to say that Heidegger's *doctrine* has shaped twentieth-century philosophy, but rather that his *thinking* did. As Arendt writes,

> it is not Heidegger's philosophy, whose existence we can rightfully question (as Jean Beaufret has done), but Heidegger's thinking that has shared so decisively in determining the spiritual physiognomy of this century. This thinking has a digging quality peculiar to itself, which, should we wish to put it in linguistic form, lies in the transitive use of the verb "to think." Heidegger never thinks "about" something; he thinks something.[86]

For Arendt, it is telling in this regard that Heidegger's fame preceded "by about eight years" his publication of *Sein und Zeit* in 1927. What attracted so many to the "hidden king in the

[85] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 194.
[86] Hannah Arendt, "Martin Heidegger at Eighty," trans. Albert Hofstadter, *New York Review of Books*, October 21, 1971, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/10/21/martin-heidegger-at-eighty/.

realm of thinking" holding court in Freiburg in those years was, in Arendt's telling, his unique ability to think the past. As she writes:

> It was technically decisive that, for instance, Plato was not talked *about* and his theory of Ideas expounded; rather for an entire semester a single dialogue was pursued and subjected to question step by step, until the time-honored doctrine had disappeared to make room for a set of problems of immediate and urgent relevance. Today this sounds quite familiar, because nowadays so many proceed in this way; but no one did so before Heidegger.
>
> The rumor about Heidegger put it quite simply: Thinking has come to life again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead, are being made to speak, in the course of which it turns out that they propose things altogether different from the familiar, worn-out trivialities they had been presumed to say. There exists a teacher; one can perhaps learn to think.[87]

This thesis confronts the hard questions raised by Arendt: on the one hand, what it means to think today, and on the other, what it means to confront the past not out of antiquarian historical curiosity but as ways to think today. I have done so with respect to a Kantian question that, as I have shown, dogged Heidegger and Arendt as much as many other nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers: what is man?

Ultimately, I feel that in response to this question what is called for, what calls for us, is *thinking*. This is a thinking that cannot but be situated and embodied, and for that purpose the history of thought as I have pursued it in this thesis is essential. The call to situate and embody your knowledge might be understood as nothing other than the Delphic injunction to *gnōthi seauton*, to "know thyself," or put in Socratic terms, to recognize that the one thing you can know in knowing yourself is to realize what you do not know. The call to study older thinkers is not a call to dissect and taxidermize, whether to extract wisdom for the present or preserve it for the future. Rather, studying thinking of the past is itself a call to thought, and a promise that "one can perhaps learn to think."

[87] Ibid.

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on one philosophical theme that emerged from the reception of Martin Heidegger's work in France from about 1930 to 1960: "negative philosophical anthropology," which Emmanuel Levinas says in a 1956 essay "holds the surprise for us of an atheism that is not humanist." What does this phrase mean? What are the factors at play in the emergence of this kind of thought in France in the years before and after World War II? The first part of this thesis addresses this question with reference to the work of Stefanos Geroulanos, an intellectual historian, inflected by my own readings of salient texts by Levinas and Heidegger. In the second part, I take up the "anthropological" dimension of this philosophical development by focusing on one work that emerges from this milieu: *La pensée sauvage* (1962) by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss, responding to Sartre and situating himself within the French reception of Heidegger, claimed that the task of the human sciences, including anthropology, was now "not to constitute man, but to dissolve him." And yet, Lévi-Strauss' work is driven as much by a Heideggerian *negative* anthropology as it is by a *positive* science of anthropology. This aspect of Lévi-Strauss' work has been discussed in relation to his uptake of Saussure and of earlier ethnographers (including the time he spent in Brazil in the 1930s). By contrast, I focus on Lévi-Strauss' reading of Auguste Comte. In the third part of this thesis, I conclude by considering the stakes of contemporary philosophical anthropology, taking as exemplary Philippe Descola's uptake of Lévi-Strauss as part of the so-called "ontological turn." For Descola and his readers, as for many other anthropologists today, anthropology is inscribed as both science and critique, both an operation of knowledge and a site of its destabilization — in other words, anthropology today is at once *positive* and *negative*. My hope with this thesis is to gesture towards what this means and how this state of affairs has come to be.

At its broadest, this thesis takes as its theme the relationship between philosophy on the one hand and politics, religion, and science on the other. At the crux of these relationships, as Kant pointed out long ago, is the question of anthropology: What is man? The answer to this question, Kant says, is given by the answers to his three better-known philosophical questions — What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? — since man, for Kant, is as at once cognizer, agent, and conditioned by history and culture. In this thesis, I approach these questions from the perspective of Heidegger's reception and deep influence in twentieth-century thought, and in particular the fraught "anthropologization" of *Dasein*. This theme is addressed at a level between history of philosophy and intellectual history, since the problem of Heidegger is at once a problem of politics and of philosophy, a problem *of* and *for* thinking. At this broad level, I take the cue for this approach from Hannah Arendt's work, which I read as itself being at once deeply philosophical and, in being philosophical, concerned with that which eludes philosophy (or that philosophy elides), politics. While Arendt and Kant do not form the foreground of this work, they frame the questions I ask and the approach I adopt.

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