

A Human Education?

René V. Arcilla

New York University

Normally, sentences introducing an academic talk try to achieve their end in the least obtrusive fashion possible. After an opening that is supposed to hook the audience gracefully, the next few lines should direct it to the paper's topic without prolonging uncertainty or testing patience, such as by going on about what everybody already knows. They should explain how certain developments in a given and familiar scholarly conversation raise a question in which there is something significantly at stake. What kind of question? One that is as concrete as possible, not the least so that the proposed approach to responding to it may be equally concrete and well-defined, and build on previous work in the field. Having reviewed how this work broaches a significant problem, and having sketched out a promising line of response, the normal introduction would then culminate in the announcement of a central thesis. This is the talk's main point.[†]

* * *

So why am I departing from this expectation? The reason, I have to confess, is that instead of being absorbed in the talk's topic, I find myself embarrassed by its conventional form. It now feels somehow false to produce this essay as if it were a record of a steady stream of reasoning. My real thinking, sentence after sentence, word by word, is distinctly halting — this calls for disclosure. Yet if I were to do this, what would be the purpose? What significance would this acknowledgment have, not just for me, but also for my audience, which, come to think of it, appears to call for recognition too? What draws me away from introducing this talk in the usual fashion, then, is the question of how to affirm meaningfully my thinking's lapses into silence, on the one hand, and its address to an audience, on the other. Indeed, noticing that these two qualities of thought tend to be equally overlooked broaches the possibility that they are related to each other. Could marking a pause in thinking have something to do with explicitly addressing that thinking to *you*? And could there be at stake in this question of form a matter of philosophical and educational content?

* * *

Reflecting on this question leads me to wonder where it came from. Could its source be the very "you" I am in communication with? But then, who exactly are "you"? Does the pronoun refer to anyone who happens to hear these words? Or does it point to some specific person or persons I mean to address? And, if the latter, then what kinds of people do I have in mind?

In reply to this protracted, somewhat discomfiting interrogation, I am inclined to reach for the easiest, most reassuring, least audience-provoking answer: "you" refers

[†] Note: The asterisks between some paragraphs indicate pauses to be taken in reading this text. These moments of silence are essential to what the text has to discuss.

to you human beings. I am speaking to all humans. The philosophical meaning of acknowledging my address is therefore fairly clear: I am claiming that I am capable of speaking to all human beings. I am remarking that we possess a common nature. Of course, the significance of this observation is rather underwhelming; it is hard to imagine you finding this news.

* * *

Once this notion occurs to me, though, it places me, whether I like it or not, in a dialectical relationship to others who do doubt that there is any such nature at all. As soon as I, with the usual confidence, I speak the word “human,” this utterance silently draws into me the countervailing words of a ventriloquist interlocutor who assumes the role of my conscience. Accordingly, I hear in my mind your famous lines, Michel Foucault, that conclude *The Order of Things*:

If these arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility — without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises — were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.¹

Your image augurs the end of man, the closure of the era of humanism, and an opening to something that would be radically other. The sand face is exposed to a power that is disintegrating. This power manifests itself in the events that cause certain social arrangements to appear and disappear, arrangements that serve as the condition for the possibility of the discourse of humanism. It, and you, thus push me to admit that “humanity” is not a natural property of certain bodies but a historical construction. And you tempt me to welcome a future opportunity to disown it. Indeed, you make me wonder why I am more compelled to reply to your antihumanist speculation than to address the presumed humans before me.

* * *

Why would I leave the human realm? Perhaps a reason will emerge when I imagine the face in the sand in more detail. For instance, could its features not well be those of Desiderius Erasmus? Think of Hans Holbein the Younger’s portraits of him, I hear you proposing, particularly the one in the Louvre painted circa 1523.² The picture shows the Northern Renaissance scholar dressed in a dark cloak and black cap, standing against the background of a wooden wall half-covered with a forest-green tapestry on which emblems of nature’s cornucopia, such as flowers and mythical creatures, have been embroidered. Erasmus is writing the opening to his commentary on the Gospel of Saint Mark. Compared to the somber and austere setting and garments, the humanist’s face in profile, like that of a king on a coin, on the one hand, and his hands, the paper, and the tablecloth, on the other, form two pools of light. The face expresses intense concentration, with the half-closed eyes focused on the page, as if the act of writing calls for a balance of outward and inward attention. In the meantime, the hands hold pen and paper with palpable lightness, about to resume their motion quickened by insight.

Erasmus’s renown as the preeminent humanist of the pre-Reformation moment, the one on whom contemporaries pinned their hopes for a resolution of the doctrinal

disputes splitting apart the Christian community, and who disappointed them, makes him a fitting symbol of the Human That Failed, the figure that you imagine, Foucault, being eventually effaced. Indeed, the exposure of the sand image to degradation resembles the way that your painting, Holbein, discloses the weakness, not of a particular person, but of a moral ideal. By portraying the person's body naturalistically and in a commonplace setting, as compared to the way sacred beings and scenes dominate painting before the Renaissance, you locate Erasmus's human realm distinctly below that of the divine. I am looking less at the *imago Dei* than at my neighbor. On the other hand, by spotlighting his thoughtful face, you lift him from the realm of animals and insentient beings lacking reason. Situated between the beasts and the angels, Erasmus is supposed to share this condition with you, Foucault, and me. His communicative hands testify to his access to universally human truths that promise to penetrate narrow-minded folly and sectarian strife.

Why, then, did this ideal of humanism founder?

And on what basis do you all, Foucault, perhaps unintentionally Holbein, and maybe even others, form an antihumanist current?

* * *

Part of an answer may lie in the fact that the face you show me, Holbein, is of a white European male cleric with all-too-familiar interests. Some of these are registered in the telltale signs of his rings, in the plural, and his cloak's fur trimming. They make it easy to understand why the peasants on whom he depended, for example, or the women among them, may have had opposing interests, and why these groups may have been swayed more by religious reformers and antireformers, or just plain non-Christians, with whom they share experiences deeper and more scarring than some putatively innate "light of reason." Accordingly, your exposure of Erasmus's group identity renders the notion of situating human beings between the animals and the gods in order to establish a communication that transcends community borders nothing but a ploy. Erasmus, like you, cannot be beneath the deities because you and your like created them; following Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, the gods represent the alienation of your work.³ Conversely, Giorgio Agamben has pointed out that the boundary between human and beast is manipulable depending on how you want to use this distinction against others like those barbarian fundamentalists.⁴ No wonder, then, that your humanist painting looks like a mere face in the sand: it is wholly unlike me. Or even you, in important respects. Right?

* * *

To distance myself from such fictive portraits of the human, I have only to echo a common gibe of my time: "But who is this 'we'?" This rhetorical question challenges a speaker who invokes something that "we" should do or something about "us" to prove he is not overlooking a significant difference that separates him from his audience, such as one rooted in gender, sexuality, race, class, or historical culture. At stake in its suspicions is the "politics of recognition," to use the title of your widely influential paper, Charles Taylor.⁵ You explicate there the tension in liberal democracies between safeguarding the recognition and treatment of people

as equal in their dignity, and the recognition and treatment of them as dissimilar in their cultural identities. The reason the recognition of cultural diversity has become important to the citizens of such societies is that it follows from a commitment to the moral ideal of authenticity. According to this ideal, “there is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s life.”⁶ If, on the contrary, I am viewed as living someone else’s life, someone’s stereotype of people of my kind, then I am not being recognized for the person I am authentically. Because this misrecognition prevents me from freely living my way, it harms me.

* * *

This last point, though, feels a little unconvincing. When I recall experiences of being the target of racist epithets, for instance, I am not so sure that these episodes, however distressing, affected my capacity to lead an authentic life. To believe that: would that not exaggerate the power of such incidents? Why would I want to subject myself to them in that way?

* * *

It is not so easy to shrug off such attacks, you contend, because identity is formed through dialogue. I cannot explore my way of life unless I cultivate an understanding of myself in a verbal or nonverbal language. I have no identity unless I can express and reflect on it. At birth, however, I possess no such language either. “People do not acquire languages needed for self-definition on their own. Rather, we are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us.”⁷ Furthermore, you explain, the genesis of my identity in this fashion has no clear terminal point; throughout my life, I will continue to revise my self-understanding in conversation with trusted others who help me extend my fluency and who thereby influence my very essence. What can be devastating, then, is when such a teacher, perhaps in a class on Renaissance humanist portraiture, saddles me with a language that puts dignity out of reach. When that language identifies people with my features with certain irremediable limitations, my self-confidence may over time be so weakened that even a stray slight throws me into despair.

Hence the challenge, “But who is this ‘we’?” asks whoever is addressing me to demonstrate that he has not misrecognized me by presuming that he and I have shared interests, such as in Western humanism, let alone shared identities. In line with the ideal of authenticity and the dialogical nature of identity formation, how I want to be recognized should be respected unless this comes into clear conflict with other democratic values. So you reason, Taylor.

* * *

Now I do share your democratic sympathies. My reservation about your argument, however, is that it seems to overestimate the mastery I can have over a language. The ideal of authenticity implies that even if my fluency is still evolving, I am nevertheless in a position to define myself in that language, to stipulate that I am this sort of person and not that, and to demand, if only implicitly, that I be properly recognized by you. Without this capacity for self-definition, the ideal makes no sense. However,

if I take seriously the fact that I will never achieve command over a language, if I acknowledge that my identity has to rely on terms that I cannot conclusively fix because they are always open to your reinterpretation, then can I maintain I really possess this capacity? For example, suppose I pride myself on being an antihumanist, yet you point out that my behavior, my signifying body, tells a different story — have I accurately described myself? If I am not defensive about your line of questioning, I might agree that I described myself only provisionally, subject to later revision; for now, though, I might insist, I want to claim the last word about myself. But if defining myself is a process of perpetual self-revision, then how seriously can I, or you, take the notion of definition or last word?

* * *

It appears I cannot control how you read me. You are always apt to see things in me other than what I intended or want to affirm and to ask that I take your views into account. To the extent that these observations are based on demonstrable possibilities in the language that puts you and me in touch in the first place, they are not erroneous, and their pertinence for who I am cannot be denied. This means that I am always exposed to “misrecognition,” or, less moralistically, to the separation of how I appear to you from how I appear to myself. My identity may repeatedly be split. Under these conditions, then, I cannot take myself finally to be either a member of a community or an individual. A community entails a clear line between insiders and outsiders, us and them, whereas the language I must use to trace such a line cannot be governed by it. Let me stress that I am referring to the specific capacity of language to generate surplus meaning, which is distinct from the traditional association of languages with particular speaking communities. As for “individuality,” the term applies to beings that are supposed to be indivisible. When I express myself to you, and hear in turn your response, I can abruptly find myself beside myself. If I am neither an individual nor a member of a definite community, then what am I?

* * *

The effacement of the human, carrying off with it the ideal of authenticity, evidently leaves in question my very identity, my self-preservation in the realm of understanding. This is a first, threatening consequence of looking into the mirror of the sand face. But instead of hastening to reinforce my authentic self, I see that its deconstruction broaches a second, yet related, line of questioning for me to adventure into: What exactly is the nature of the power that washes away my face? Why is it that language eludes my mastery?

Your “Letter on Humanism,” Martin Heidegger, offers food for thought.⁸ The very idea of the human, you claim, comes from a source other than humans. But also other than the gods or God. The human being is a kind of being that is intelligible to me only because I have an understanding, however inchoate, of what it means for anything to be. Accordingly, I can think about humans and other beings because I can think Being. However, you elucidate, this is not due to some capacity on my part: I could not deliberately think or do *anything* if I were not thinking Being *already*. Rather than claiming that I *can* think Being, then, it is less misleading to testify that Being *has appeared* in my thinking:

Thinking accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man. It does not make or cause the relation. Thinking brings this relation to Being solely as something handed over to it from Being. Such offering consists in the fact that in thinking Being comes to language. Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells.⁹

Another intriguing image presents itself to me here. Being enters into a house of language. And in this language, I live, but the language is not my or anyone else's home. The words I speak are not originally mine, and not those of my linguistic community, such as the English, but, before that, Being's. Accordingly, when I care about those words I am caring for their real source. You are thus moved to acknowledge your and my primal responsiveness and responsibility to this spring: "Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being ... whose dignity consists in being called by Being itself into the preservation of Being's truth."¹⁰ Neither my truth, nor your truth, can be what is at stake here. But why, then, would anyone wonder about Being?

* * *

The disappearance of the recognizable sand face, you are suggesting, is merely the negative side of the miraculous apparition in my mind and mouth of words that do not belong to me. This is why, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a language of self-definition. The source of speaking and thinking has shifted, as it were, to Being. The problem with the image of the human, therefore, is not only that it depends on arrangements rooted in specific historical communities, arrangements that humanism hides. Besides that fictional universality, the human projects a fictional autonomy. The writing at the tip of Erasmus's pen seems to be coming from a self-determining individual, a Cartesian subject. You, Heidegger, however, enjoin me to think of the matter the other way around. "Erasmus the humanist" is a provisional commentary on and illustration of, so to speak, still prior terms that nevertheless remain stubbornly foreign, terms that preexist, as well, the Gospel. It is as if the words on Erasmus's sheet of paper comprise an only partially understood, half-cryptic, prehistoric call for thinking. Perhaps the true subject of the painting is thus the power of this call that holds Erasmus, and me and you, still, spellbound in thought.

* * *

As you note in a later book, however, for another's thought to have the power to absorb me, it would have to hold as well something meaningfully unthought.¹¹ Ironically, it is precisely this point that invites me to veer off from you. Your thought, as I understand it, revolves around three main concepts: Being, language, and "man" or the human. Accordingly, I express my humanity when I celebrate the ontological source of my speech and reject any pretension to being a self-possessed, sovereign, humanist author-figure. Now I do find this insight inspiring, but I worry that the possibilities it gives birth to will be stunted if they are confined to a discourse of critical argument. Suppose, on the contrary, I read the stress on "Being" as breaking not only from the concept of "beings," but from this very discourse of conceptualizable and representational things. "Being" would then signal a move to an alternative, poetic discourse, one focusing on the *happening* of certain things that, unlike those things, cannot be represented. Indeed, this *presenting* would constitute thinking itself, no

longer understood as someone's action. My departure, in a nutshell, is to try to follow a language that is neither anthropocentric, theocentric, or Being-centric, indeed, that lacks any center at all. *Whatever* it is that *appears* in language, be it William Carlos Williams's red wheelbarrow or, indeed, a face in the sand, this event itself can turn language into a world in which I and you and it dwell, and can dispel the notion that language is merely my tool. My calling, then, would be to cultivate such seeds of poetry and to amplify their antirhetorical, unargumentative bloom.

And, of course, there is no poetry without heed to form, to how what is said articulates the meaning of what is silently shown.

* * *

At last, I find myself in a position to connect the first line of questioning provoked by your face in the sand, Foucault, the one that leads to the deconstruction of the ideal of authenticity, to the other line of questioning that leads to the sense that the language in which you and I live can be no one's property. These two intersect at the opportunity to redefine, rather than simply negate, what is human. Acknowledging that I can always be dispossessed of my identity by how others interpret it, let me stipulate that the term does *not* refer to what I am and must be. I am not human: I am an American, for instance, or a schizophrenic, or an ironist, and so forth, in your eyes, for a time, until the image alters. What is human is rather a language that stands apart from me, especially because it is larger than my ability to use it for my own ends. Unlike English, for example, I cannot speak Human in a rhetorically effective fashion; in fact, when I betray something in English that I did not mean, Human is what is coming out. In this way, you and I and everyone else in communication, even if only through crude translation, *participate* in human language. This linguistic society could include other animals or space aliens once I believe I am communicating with them too. (Having explicitly uprooted the language from any home community, I trust you will not see the inclusion of other species as anthropomorphizing them.) As speakers of various community languages come increasingly to talk to strangers and intermingle and intermix with them, as their literatures and works in nonverbal languages influence and respond to each other, human language prevails. More and more, it speaks through what I want to say too, surprising and dismaying me, as if it has a semantic will of its own. For this reason, it is easy to sympathize with those who feel attacked by this tongue and want to defend themselves by insisting on clarity, borders, and identities. On the rule that it is only what is literally said that matters.

* * *

Yet this need not be my reaction, all of you appear to declare. Beyond resigning myself to suffering this recalcitrant language, and the way it renders me porous to interruptions from your many voices, I could say yes to my participation in it. I could cease struggling to possess my experiences and instead welcome how they introduce us to the human. As each of them is registered in this medium, they become no longer mine or yours, ours or theirs. How alien to everyone they are is now obvious. You and I and everyone else may then, by this translation into Human, marvel at how much there is to discern together in what each person has undergone. Indeed, "we"

may find our muse in another moral ideal. “I can be human with you” means that I can savor how, without defensive assertiveness or pretensions to ownership, we share our infinitely elusive, wondrous world. Cast in Freudian form, the aspiration would be that where unconscious Human-speaking society was, so shall there be its conscious celebration in a revitalized humanist conversation.

Needless to say, I have tried to pursue this conversation in this essay. More than in what you all, Foucault, Holbein, Taylor, and Heidegger, have to say *about* the human, I have been intrigued by what you have to say *to* each other, not to mention to me. In particular, I have explored how placing your texts and artworks in interactive contact alters their meanings, sometimes quite ironically. The light on Erasmus’s face now appears as whiteness; the politics of recognition as mutually assured self-deconstruction; and the language of Being as Erasmus inspired by what escaped Saint Mark. Yes, part of me sometimes still worries that I am misreading how these authors mean to express themselves. Yet such a scruple presupposes a subject that is being daily eroded by inevitable misunderstanding and proliferating interpretations. Who really needs it and the illusion that it is carved in the stone of human nature? Not when there is a more fertile silence.

* * *

What has been taking place? Listening to this silence, this momentary check on my ability to speak, I opened myself to your thinking calling for a response. What halted my thinking, then, took the form of a question. Addressing you in reply even as I sought to understand you more fully, I implicated still others in what you were asking. Other interlocutors expanded the conversation taking place intimately in my mind — and perhaps in the minds of still others who may right now be thinking about adding to it. Communion and wonder: these, then, are the philosophical passions awakened in me by human language. They are what inspired me to break with the conventional academic talk.

Indeed, it is only *after* I experienced these passions in this alternative form of conversation, after this experience set in relief my point of departure — after, that is, the time of education — that I can retrospectively understand why the normal introduction to a lecture felt and feels impertinent. When such talks proclaim their aim to establish certain theses for an anonymous audience held at a distance, they are trying to offer something reliably useful to whoever might want to take it. They thus mimic the standard, modern form of instructional delivery, which is directed at students who are supposed to be interested in controlling their future lives and world. Such an interest is dispassionate; the student who freely chooses and employs tools to master the world has to be detached from it. Correspondingly, the teacher must be likewise disengaged, to a considerable degree, from these students. Discounted, counted as nothing, by this whole mode of discursive address, therefore, are those who have been dialectically drawn together into a present adventure that is dispossessing them of their selves and will to power, and incorporating them into something beyond us all. Just as a normal lecture overlooks its moments of wordlessness, it also speaks over this different kind of student, as if he or she does not exist.

Yet a formation of human speakers, a human education, the glimpse of you provokes me to ask — could this be truer to the mystery that we are?

-
1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970), 387.
 2. For an online reproduction of this painting, see <http://www.wikiart.org/en/hans-holbein-the-younger/portrait-of-desiderius-erasmus-1523>.
 3. Marx famously develops this Feuerbachian insight into his general theory of alienation. See Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," trans. Martin Milligan, in *The Marx-Engels Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 67–81.
 4. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).
 5. See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25–73.
 6. *Ibid.*, 30.
 7. *Ibid.*, 32.
 8. See Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 193–242.
 9. *Ibid.*, 193.
 10. *Ibid.*, 221.
 11. See Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray and F. Wieck (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 76.