Epilogue

From our contemporary standpoint, the idea of philosophical anthropology is bound to look abstract and remote: speculative reflections on ideas of the human that remain unconnected to specific sets of problems or particular contexts. But it is worth remembering that, as it started life in the early part of the twentieth century, philosophical anthropology was widely regarded as a second-class intellectual project. All original representatives of this tradition – Max Scheler, Ernst Cassirer, Helmuth Plessner – had to contend with the criticism that the field they were trying to establish was a 'mere' anthropology: it was poor science because its general approach was too philosophical, and it was poor philosophy because its themes were too empirical. Sympathetic as I am to this fascinating literature, it has not been my intention to resurrect it. My purpose was never to offer a complete or exhaustive set of anthropological features with which to define the human in human beings: possible omissions are so many that they hardly require further elaboration. My goal was instead to focus on those anthropological features that are of key importance at two levels: first, because they are autonomous vis-à-vis society even if their actualisation is itself social; second, because they allow us to articulate more explicitly the grounds on which normative claims are made in society: self-transcendence, adaptation, responsibility, language, strong evaluations, reflexivity and the reproduction of life all meet these two requirements. I sought to recover those sources with the help of which we may then rearticulate a universalistic idea of humanity as something that human beings have themselves created. Only an idea of humanity that results from humans' own properties, and then allows humans to reflect further on themselves as the creators of their own ideas and institutions, can then turned into a normative one: *a human is a being who does philosophical anthropology.*

To conclude, I just would like to highlight, in more systematic fashion, some of the themes that have accompanied us throughout.

The Idea of 'Normative Descriptions'

The *tension* between descriptive and normative claims has proved central in the development of the social sciences of the past 150 years. Few would deny that their interrelations pose real challenges, but little agreement remains as to what are the best way to tackle them. Given this genuine complexity, positions have tended to privilege or indeed sacrifice one over the other. As part of a programme that seeks to explore key dimensions of the human, the idea of a philosophical sociology offers in this regard the notion of *normative descriptions*. This was raised most explicitly in Chapters 2, 5, 7 and 8, and is possibly best captured in Hannah Arendt's idea that concentration camps are, *literally*, 'hell on earth'. Arendt's argument is that there are a number of social phenomena whose adequate *description* depends upon our ability to grasp its *normative* dimension. Thus seen, the idea of a normative description coheres around three basic commitments: First, a universalistic principle of humanity that treats all individual human beings as members of the same species on the grounds of the anthropological capacities that they share. Second, a definition of normativity that is explicitly based on the ways in which different practices and institutions promote or indeed undermine the development of our generic human potentials. Third, an approach where the explanatory register of the social sciences reconnects with the normative questions that we commonly associate with the philosophical tradition. Philosophical sociology does not claim that normativity is the centre of social life but contends that social life cannot be fully accounted for *without* this kind of explicit normative orientation.

The 'Scandal' of the Human Need for an Anthropology

A notion that we take from Kant, the idea of the *scandal of reason* has been used to mark a central dilemma in Kant's general anthropology (Chapters 2, 3 and 4). On the one hand, the logical integrity of the categories of understanding, as well as of the categorical imperative of morality itself, points to a claim to universality that is *not* specifically human. Kant used the idea of pure rational beings in order to highlight the fact that, if reason is to genuinely be able to provide a firm basis for science and morality, then reason cannot be seen as a purely human feature; reason cannot rely on a mere anthropology. On the other hand, Kant was equally aware of the fact that it is *human* knowledge and action that are in need in orientation; indeed, that the existential need for philosophy *is* particularly human: for philosophical arguments to work, they have to do so primarily for humans and, to a large extent also, be tailored anthropocentically to human needs.

But the idea of the scandal of reason refers to an additional challenge in Kant's thought: humans have proved unable to achieve firm, rational knowledge of precisely those areas of life that matter the most to us: *transcendental* questions about the existence of god and the possibility of life after death and *immanent* ones about how I am to handle my own free will. Kant thought that although humans do not ask themselves 'what is a human being' with the same intensity that they raise questions about god, immortality and freedom, raising the question about our human properties was just the logical consequence of interrogating about freedom and immortality: the human being then becomes reason's *popular edition* (Blumenberg 2011: 374). One variant of this argument is that, while the 'what is a human being' question may not often be posed by individuals themselves (with the exception of professional intellectuals who do so in their 'expert' capacity), questions about god, freedom and immortality *are* key existential questions about the 'meaning of life' in both its transcendental and immanent dimensions. This internal opacity and intractability of human beings for themselves is not restricted to any particular intellectual or even religious tradition. Humans are never satisfied with their own answers to the question what is a human being. But this dissatisfaction is not so much cognitive as it is normative. The urgency of the anthropological question is indeed normative: human beings are a key theme and cause of concern only for humans themselves.

The Relationships between Science and Philosophy

An argument that was discussed most extensively in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 8, the project of a *philosophical* sociology works within a contemporary context in which philosophical concerns are no longer independent from scientific ones; instead, as posthumanist debates make very clear, they are themselves shaped by the practical and technological success of the natural sciences. This does not mean that philosophical questions are now inevitably of secondary relevance: an important philosophical task that remains is to ask what is the price humans pay for having granted science such a level of cognitive authority and autonomy. More radically, the argument has been made that it is not enough for philosophy to *accept* that it has indeed lost its position of privilege vis-à-vis scientific knowledge; philosophy must still explain *philosophically* how the debacle of its own claims to knowledge has actually come about (Blumenberg 2011: 172, 358–71). Indeed, this is at least a partial inversion of a dictum that we find in various versions within the tradition of critical theory: philosophy is to create the conditions for its own dissolution (Marx

1975), or philosophy is set to carry on *while* and indeed *because* it has proved unable to bring about the good society (Adorno 1981).

It is interesting, however, that as the scope of this enquire about the human widened in order to accommodate the different knowledge-claims that orient sociology and philosophy, it also became more apparent that this was itself dependent upon the previous reduction of the legitimacy of *theological* questions as a legitimate domain of enquiry: all their problems notwithstanding, science and philosophy remain rational and immanent in a way that theology is not (Chapters 4 and 6). But even if we were to leave its dogmatic dimension out of the equation, my reconstruction in this book demonstrates that there is a strictly *speculative* side of our reflections on the humanity of human: they require us to create, imagine and indeed anticipate ideal notions of the human for which no adequate empirical evidence may ever be given.

At the same time, the very historicity of this quest about our human status in the cosmos has itself proved a transcultural and transhistorical constant (Voegelin 1962): all anthropology is historical in at least this sense. The rise of philosophical anthropology as an attempt to bring together scientific and philosophical knowledge-claims about our shared humanity can then be treated as an epochal marker: human beings have at last become aware of their own normative standing. Its emergence as a legitimate intellectual field is a historical accomplishment that must be renewed and defended because our shared humanity has become increasingly important (but also challenging) for humans themselves. More than a particular discipline or intellectual tradition, philosophical anthropology may then be seen as the constant human project through which humans try to *know themselves*. The paradigmatic philosophical reference to ideas of reflexivity of this kind is of course that of the oracle of Delphi: know thyself. As a command, self-knowledge is an anthropological theme that arises only when appeals to a divinity have given way to human reason.[1] It is human reason that triggers a process of objectivation of the world that must lead also to humans' own self-objectivation (Blumenberg 2011: 636). To know oneself means to learn the ways in which culture is able to look after the organic weaknesses of our species: self-knowledge is a fundamental tool in the project of stabilising organic adaptation. But there is also a critical ambivalence that runs through it: *self-knowledge* as a *cognitive* proposition does not necessarily lead to *self-legislation* as a *normative* claim. But if self-knowledge and self-legislation may turn out to be contradictory, this

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[1] If this is the case, then Tönnies (2005) may have been right when he made the point that Delphi's commandment *only* makes real sense if addressed *from* the standpoint of humanity as a whole and *to* humanity as a whole.

human obsession with looking inwardly runs the risk of becoming self-defeating or even harmful (Blumenberg 2015).

The Intractability of Human Nature in the Social Sciences

As we discussed them primarily in Chapters 3, 5 and 7, ideas of the social need to be looked at in their own right rather than as a derivation of ideas of agency, the individual or consciousness. To recast *the interrelationships between the social and the human* has been a central motif of both the so-called linguistic turn and the structure and agency debate that, since the early 1970s, are available in a wide range of contemporary approaches. The proposition that humans are social beings is, to that extent, only another of way of restating the obvious: approaches such as sociobiology are insufficient because the claim that humans replicate, mirror or represent an upgrade on the intrinsically social condition of ants, bees, dolphins or chimpanzees does not even begin to raise the *existential* aspects of the question what is a human being (Wilson 1978). To the best of our knowledge, these species do not dwell on the scandal of reason.

Reflections on 'the human' are expected to prove their worth by being able to specify what exactly are the properties that define the uniqueness of our species-being. Yet we also know that a substantive definition of the human has proved highly vexatious and that there is no consensual definition of 'human nature' – let alone the human as such. These questions remain contentious because *either* too much is made of concepts of human *nature*, in which case the role of social scientific explanations that focus on historical or cultural causes is significantly reduced, *or* else too little is accepted in terms of the definition of stable anthropological features, in which case social, historical and cultural relativism can be reintroduced through the back door. It has been my contention in this book that ideas of the human *are* part and parcel of the theoretical tools in contemporary social science – both descriptively and normatively. In order to make this point, a foundational insight of philosophical anthropology remains key: we ought to pay equal attention to the organic and to the intellectual aspects of our humanity – indeed, we have seen in all chapters that they are closely interrelated.

More precisely, Chapter 1 set the scene for the rest of my enquiry as I argued there that the philosophical debate on humanism between Sartre and Heidegger has shaped the two main traditions within which we still engage with ideas of the human. One approach looks at the human from the standpoint of an active agent whose autonomous and efficacious powers define the scope of her contributions to the world, whereas a second strand adopts the view that the most fundamental human trait

is the fact that we come into a world that, because it pre-exists us, is posed to us as a challenge. Other than Charles Taylor, whose position is indeed ambivalent in this respect and seems to lean towards the second herme-neutical/Heideggerian side, all the writers to whom I have devoted a whole chapter in this book can be seen as belonging to the first Kant/Sartre pole. This does not mean that Heidegger's influence is on the wane, however. Rather the opposite, we have seen in most chapters that writers themselves found the need to counteract, or at least to contend, Heidegger's *negative* anthropology. Differently put, a book could have been written by looking at the ways in which Heidegger's critique of humanism continues to influence how the humanities and social sciences approach questions about the human. Yet what is specific about *this* book – and what turns its argument into a critique against this Heideggerian influence – is precisely that it took the shape *of an anthropological project*. I sought to offer an explicit account of those human properties that allow humans to reflect on their own specifi-city and worthiness.

The Problem of Anthropocentrism

Niklas Luhmann (2012) used the idea of a 'humanist prejudice' in order to highlight a particularly *sociological* version of Gaston Bachelard's general idea of the modern sciences' epistemological obstacles: while positive knowledge of the world – both social and natural – is indeed a human accomplishment, one condition of its objectivity is the realisation that the world itself is not organised around our human needs. At the turn of the twentieth century, Edmund Husserl made a similar argument against those of his pupils who sought to advance philosophical anthropology. Husserl (1931) maintained that science and philosophy are not particularly concerned with the human being because their fundamental questions ought to focus on such general issues as the nature of organic life and the structure of the cosmos, on the scientific side, and reason and intentionality, on the philosophical side. It then ensues that, although both science and philosophy are themselves a particularly sophisticated outcome of human action, they are only possible thanks to a dual act of decentring we mentioned above: first, humans must stop putting themselves at the centre of their explanations about the func-tioning of the cosmos, culture and society and, second, they must equally accept that there is nothing necessary about their own existence.

Luhmann, Bachelard and Husserl all build here on a more general version of this argument that goes back to fifteenth-century astronomy and theology. The so-called 'Copernican turn' refers to one particular implication of Nicolaus Copernicus's demonstration that the sun rather than planet earth is at the centre of the solar system: the adequacy of

Copernicus's *scientific* observations about the orbits of planets is seen as possible because Copernicus stopped worrying about the *philosophical* and *theological* implications of the idea that humans are not at the centre of the universe. In its 'scientific' reception, the morale of Copernicus's story is clear: indifference towards the human is the price we pay for the scientific, predictive and explanatory, success of our theories. A price, indeed, he thought it was worth paying for.

Hans Blumenberg offers a different, arguably more historical and philosophical, interpretation of the Copernican turn. In the previous Ptolemaic model, the centrality of the earth's position in the cosmos was never a question in its own right. Ptolemy took the earth's central proposition for granted and denied that our planet was *at all* an object for astronomy (Blumenberg 1987: 209–16). Copernicus's *turn* was then not so much to do with the *displacement* of the earth from the centre of the solar system to the peripheral status of another planet as it was to do with its explicit *inclusion* within a cosmos of celestial objects; Copernicus's success has to do with the fact that he was able to find *a position for the earth within the solar system*. Thus seen, far from a rejection of anthropocentrism, Copernicus's *real* turn entails rather a *renewal* of the possibility of the 'rational coordination' between man and the cosmos (1987: 224). What humans lose in terms of transcendental certainty they gain in terms of their cognitive ability to make sense of the world that surrounds them: 'the fact that the world was created for man does not guarantee primarily the security of his life, but rather the performance of his reason in relation to the whole . . . The senses have lost their Paradise, not reason' (1987: 203). The renewal of the human trust in its own rational powers, that marks the rise of modern times, will now have to be able to compensate for the fact that god is no longer available for advice. The modern predicament is marked, therefore, by what Blumenberg calls the 'ambiguous effect of Copernicanism on human self-consciousness . . . it could just as well be the humiliation of losing the central position as the triumph of the reason that penetrated the foreground of appearances' (1987: 81).

Throughout this book, these questions have appeared as the problems of anthropocentrism and humanism and we may once again attempt at their delimitation. Anthropocentrism refers primarily to the subjective perspective that humans *cast on the world*; it refers to the perspectivism that emerges out of the bodily constitution of the human condition and which then makes humans turn themselves into the standard with which to measure everything that takes place in the world:

Anthropocentrism is not a physical fact but more nearly a kind of juridical state of affairs that not only allows man to preserve his existence with the aid of nature but also certifies the undisputedness of this usufruct . . . Above all, the idea of the unchallenged utilization of a pre-existing usefulness excludes an attitude that was

evidently, if not detected, then suspected as an implication in the pagan formulas of anthropocentrism: the conversion of the right to self-preservation into a claim of right to the world. (1987: 188)

Anthropocentrism ultimately relies on a principle of human authorship whose purpose is to establish the following formula: the human origins of X equal a right over X. For its part, humanism refers to the normative articulation of the human as a possessor of intrinsic qualities and, above all, dignity. The universalistic principle of humanity that is central to this book is then being pulled in two opposing directions: it must simultaneously *affirm the general* inclusion of all human beings (and thus favour *some* form of humanism and anthropocentrism) but then also accept that our very perspectivism as a species shows also the limitations, or at least the dangers, of humanism and anthropocentrism. Evolution does not lead to the human being as its final point and human beings are a contingent principle for everything but themselves. Yet the fact that human beings are *not* at the centre of the universe does not change the fact that they are at the centre of their own human life. The only consistent form of anthropocentrism is the one that gives an account of itself as a human accomplishment and, in so doing, it *reinforces* a sense of human dignity: 'the anthropocentrism that affirms and posits itself must be transparent to itself and should not be based on the illusions of the organization of our equipment for experiencing the world, if that anthropocentrism is meant to be constituted as a rational option of consciousness' (1987: 124). The deeper we try to justify social institutions in terms of their anthropological underpinnings – and this argument is present in one way or another in every single Chapter of my book – the less humans are able to reclaim their own centrality in the *natural* cosmos. At the same time, as the human capacity for instrumental action has expanded to almost no end, the normative implications of anthropocentrism grow ever more untenable.[2] The more that humans get to know about the natural world, the less they are able to reclaim a strictly *anthropological* stake in the quest for the meaning of the cosmos: the natural world becomes in fact even more unpredictable, and even also dangerous, for human beings (Blumenberg 2011: 488).

Crises in contemporary society are surely related to the experiences of modernity in the conventional sense in which they are understood: between values and institutions, between good intentions and awful deeds. They *are* related to success and failures of progress, democracy and capitalism. But they also belong in our perennial inability to accept the difficulties that ensue when human beings gather courage and decide to reflect about themselves.

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[2] Recent debates on the Anthropocene are a case in point. See Chernilo (2017).