



# Over the ruins of subjects: A critique of subjectivism in anthropological discourse

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## Abstract

The present article develops a theoretical and philosophical critique of the subjectivist paradigm that grounds a good part of present-day anthropological discourse. The main thesis is that by placing the individual and its subjective experiences at the beginning and end of the anthropological discourse, one never thoroughly acknowledges and accepts our non-subjective and finite modes of being, thereby replicating a distorted and shallow picture of what we are as humans. The article explores, first, how that subjectivist paradigm came about, as well as some of its problems; secondly, it considers ethics and morality as the domain where one can better grasp the limits of subjectivist orientations; and concludes by turning to Heidegger's perspective on the ontological finitude of Dasein in order to emphasize the need for contemporary anthropology to build its reflections from within human finitude, that is, the frailties and the practical, analytic and moral limits of human existence.

## Keywords

Subjectivity and reflexivity, experience turned onto itself, human finitude, Dasein, Martin Heidegger

At the intersection of the ever-plural history of anthropology lies a – not always explicit – tension between society, or culture, and the individual. A tension that works as the very driving force behind anthropology's theoretical developments and internal critiques.

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In recent decades, however, the turn towards the individual, or the subject, has been rather intensified. By looking with some distance at the broader picture of anthropology's historical unfolding as a discipline, one can say that the 'individual' and the 'subject' gradually took the place of 'culture' as the epistemological, moral and rhetorical paradigm informing contemporary general concerns. This does not mean that anthropology is no longer concerned with 'culture', or 'cultures', but that their compasses tend to point towards the 'magnetic individual', in its manifold subjective and corporeal aspects, rather than towards the (alleged) reified and abstract concepts of society or culture (see e.g. Brumann 1999).

This article does not directly address this tension, its eventual difficulties, or possible solutions. Instead, its purpose is to reflect about the leaning towards the subject and the subjectivist orientation in some forms of contemporary anthropological discourse. As a general thesis underpinning this article is the contention that such subjectivism, as an epistemological, moral and rhetorical paradigm, is turning contemporary anthropological reflections into reductionist practices that equate the human being to the experiencing subject. In its attempt to ground anthropological knowledge in the figure of the individual, its subjectivity, autonomy, body or senses, a rather superficial and distorted view of what we are as humans is conveyed. One of the consequences, which is highlighted later in the article, is that the frailties, and the practical, analytic and moral limits inhering in human existence – what is here called 'human finitude' – are overlooked and neglected.

Overall, the word 'subject' is taken here to refer to that which emerges from an objectivist projection and representation that the individual casts over itself, thereby reducing the human both to its physical, tangible aspects and to an inner drive and autonomy that inhabits it. By implication, 'subjectivism' is employed to mean the impetus feeding into the attempt to turn the subject within the human into both the starting point and the central issue of analysis, description and conceptualisation.

The difficulties resulting from such subjectivism are here approached from three different yet interrelated perspectives. The article traces, first, its genealogy within the history of anthropology and how it becomes 'experience turned onto itself'; it then tries to briefly illustrate how such subjectivist bent meets its most obvious shortcomings when applied to the domain of ethics, leading us away from acknowledging human limitations and finitude; finally, it draws on Heidegger's general view of the human being as fundamentally constituted by finitude (again, not as death but as existential, or ontological, limits) in order to underline and shed some light on the limitations inhering in the subjectivist paradigm, and to suggest a possible move away from its self-centred concerns with reflexivity, the body or the senses.

## **Subjectivism as experience turned onto itself**

Anthropology's leaning toward the individual and the subject is usually associated with the so-called post-modern turn in anthropology (e.g. Kapferer, 2004; Keane, 2003). If until the 1970s the general concern was directed by an interest in cultural contexts and their particularities, since the advent of interpretative anthropology and the

'writing culture' movement, the paradigm gradually became that of the agency and subjectivism of individuals. This turn was constituted by a progressive emphasis on what Keane (2003: 223) has called an 'epistemology of intimacy', that is, the anchoring of anthropology's epistemological and moral dimensions at the level of individuals and their self-interpretations.

However, the origin of this paradigm shift does not seem to be in the interpretive and political turn in the 1970s but some decades earlier. Although with some previous echoes, such as Sapir's ([1924] 1949; [1932] 1949) idea of the 'individual as the locus of culture' (which, as it is articulated, is a very reasonable one), or the Culture and Personality school, it is in the mid-1950s that we see the subject becoming a clear object of anthropology. Alfred I. Hallowell (e.g. 1955) took a substantive step in that direction by placing the notion of 'self' at the centre of anthropological discourse as a category, simultaneously rejecting the concepts of *ego*, *superego* and *id* due to their Freudian overtones which seemed to have no application in other cultures. From then until the end of the 20th century, the analysis and elucidation of cultural differences based on the notion of 'self', or 'person', became a key topic in anthropology (Carrithers et al., 1985; Ewing, 1990; Kondo, 1990; Marsella et al., 1985; Rosenberger, 1992; Wagner, 1991; White and Kirkpatrick, 1985). However, anthropologists soon realised that the emphasis on the self as a *thing* would risk making it nothing more than a reified, impersonal entity if its subjective dimension was ignored. Following this concern, some prominence was given to the cultural variation in the experience of subjectivity and the expression of feelings (Briggs, 1987; Lutz, 1988; Rosaldo, 1984).

In the late 1960s and the 1970s, Victor Turner's work transfers the tensions between the individual and the group to the antagonisms between individuals themselves. By means of the analogy that social reality is something akin to a stage where individuals wear masks and play specific roles, we are gradually led by Turner to the conclusion that the 'drama' of which we are part is little more than a permanent tension between its various 'roles', that is, individuals and their incommensurable subjectivities, wills and desires. Later, in the paradigmatic works of postmodern anthropology, *Writing Culture* (Marcus and Clifford, 1986) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer, 1986), this same issue is conceptualised through the idea of 'polyvocality': one leaves behind the anonymous and authoritative voice of the narrating anthropologist and gives the frontstage to the existing subjectivities and its manifold voices – including the anthropologist's (Okely and Callaway, 1992) – as well as the multiple contingencies and tensions that constitute societies. All these should be represented in the text as faithfully as possible.

As the focus gradually narrows to the sphere of the subject's sense of self, feelings and the tensions that arise from it, the question of suffering acquires a central role. From the late 1980s onwards, the notion of 'trauma' and the individual suffering associated with it became the watermark of social scientific discourse (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009: 15–23). From a historical perspective, one can clearly see how the concerns voiced by anthropologists who stood up critically against the objectification of the Other perpetuated by their predecessors found a possible theoretical and ethical solution in the subjectification of the Other's suffering (Das et al., 2000; Kleinman et al., 1997).

Subsequent approaches, such as Abu-Lughod's (1991) and Rapport's (2002a, 2002b) are clear steps towards a further subjectivism of anthropological discourse with a thorough rejection of the notion of 'culture' and, consequently, of its collective dimension;<sup>1</sup> in short, a progressive subjectification. At first, with the advent of the symbolic and interpretative turn and under the seal of relativism, cultures were transformed into incommensurable entities that should only be described and understood in their own terms; at a later stage, it was the very idea of culture that had to be dismantled and – as a postmodern epilogue to Malinowski's 'methodological individualism' (Leach, 1957; Stocking, 1986) – replaced by the individual processes, actors and perspectives that compose it and which represent countless tensions and points of view that are antagonistic and contradictory to each other. Culture is thus transformed into numberless voices armed with their particular interests and subjectivities. As Sangren (1988) accurately observed, in the so-called postmodern anthropology, with its reflexive and subjectivist impetus, lies a particular form of Western 'individualist, bourgeois ideology' which, to a large extent, seems to be at odds with its fundamental presuppositions.

In recent decades, the seeds of 'polyvocality', reflexivity and freedom sown by postmodern anthropology have begun to bear new fruits. The proposal to take the body as a paradigm for anthropology (Csordas, 1990; Taylor, 2005; see also Wolputte, 2004), or as an 'indeterminate methodological field' (Csordas, 1994); the reflections on the role of the senses as ethnographic and knowledge production tools (Howes, 2003; Pink, 2009); the theorization over the notion of 'affect' and its distinction from the notion of 'emotion' within the 'affective turn' (Clough and Halley, 2007; Massumi, 2002, 2015); and, as a brief look at the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* would attest, autoethnography as a self-reflective practice and a starting point for generalisations about the world (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 2004) – all these developments are, like their predecessors, also built upon a paradigm of reflexivity, subjectivity and self-analysis.

It goes without saying that these are valuable theoretical developments, stemming from dialogues with philosophy (especially its phenomenological branch). The issue lies, however, in how they usually become self-centred issues (and anthropological objects) infinitely revolving around themselves. The general problem concerning these later developments can be briefly stated by looking at the particular case of the reflections concerning the body. Albeit usually grounded in phenomenological-oriented accounts (e.g. Csordas, 2011; Desjarlais, 1992; Halliburton, 2002), they seem to undermine their own phenomenological purposes by repeatedly turning 'experience' into an object for analysis, description and theorisation. In an excellent and exhaustive review of phenomenology in anthropology, Desjarlais and Throop (2011, 89 emphasis added) resumed nicely what is here identified as the problem: 'From a phenomenological perspective, the living body is considered *the existential null point* from which our various engagements with the world—whether social, eventful or physical—are transacted'. This issue will be complemented below when discussing Heidegger, but the problem here is precisely that of conceiving the body as a kind of ground, or foundation, from where our interaction with the world begins. With this turn to the body, the *locus* of meaning is relocated from the 'cartesian subject' to the borders of the 'phenomenological body' – and yet, it never leaves the figure of the individual. The subjectivism does not end

when one substitutes the 'body' for the 'consciousness' as the ground for our engagements with the world: it is still subjectivism, or experience, now turned onto itself.

This is precisely what seems to be the case when, again, Desjarlais and Throop (2011: 90) define the most significant contribution of phenomenological anthropologists as their effort to ground 'their theorizing, description, and analysis in close examinations of concrete bodily experiences, forms of knowledge, and practice'. The phenomenological paradox here, however, is that when one turns to a 'close examination' of bodily interactions and experiences, the body ceases to be the 'null point' of those engagements and becomes the object towards which they are now directed. This is also why the body does not even become an issue in Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology (see Aho, 2009), as opposed to what we find in other phenomenologists. Being bodily engaged and attuned with others and the world (and indeed such is the way we *are* in-the-world) means, after all, that the body is dissolved behind, or is concealed by, our own practical involvements with that same world – precisely like Heidegger's famous hammer analogy: when the hammer is working effectively *as* a hammer, it disappears, or is concealed, therefore, it does not even become an issue when the carpenter is absorbed in his work, nailing boards and building furniture.

Let us conclude our genealogy for now and sum it up. By presenting this brief sketch of the unfolding of a subjectivist paradigm in anthropological discourse, the purpose is not to build a general critique of each and every argument made within the areas or works mentioned. Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasize that this is *a* possible genealogy: from within anthropology's ever-plural history, it is always possible to draw different genealogies and to name works that stand as an exception to a supposed rule. Nevertheless, this should not prevent us from identifying in the history of anthropology a gradual shift of emphasis towards an attempt to ground its several discussions and reflections in the figure of the individual and, thus, in a subjectivist paradigm. It goes without saying that the concern raised here regarding such subjectivist orientations is not intended to build a case for objectivist knowledge. Rather, it is meant to bring to light the radical subjectivism that runs through it *and* underline what is neglected in the process.

It turns out that this subjectivism is no longer that of the author, or a specific collaborator (which is already problematic in its own way), but subjectivism as a tool, a method, an object, an issue in itself. By placing at the beginning and end of the anthropological discourse the individual and its subjective or embodied experience, one ends up endorsing, following Charles Taylor's (1989) expression, a kind of 'radical reflexivity': that is, not the act of being more self-conscious or reflecting more deeply than before upon one's own condition; but the act of taking the very awareness of oneself, one's senses, body or inner sphere, as a realm and object of analysis in an attempt to lay there the bedrock of knowledge and existence: *experience turned onto itself*. Heidegger articulates this same insight – about a postmodern subjectivism that objectifies itself – in the notion of *Enframing* (Ger., *Gestell*): the technologization of being, or of all that *is*. In other words, the ability to put all that *is* at the disposal of a 'representation', making room, in turn, for an 'unlimited power for the calculating, planning, and molding of all

things' (1977: 135), to the extent that this unlimited power is now directed towards the subject itself.<sup>2</sup>

And it is precisely here, at the point where subjectivism, reflexivity or experience turns onto itself, that we can see its most spurious consequences. Instead of an abstract theoretical argument, however, let us see those consequences in more vivid and concrete forms by looking into Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea*. There, we can find a suggestive (albeit extreme) illustration of what can happen when we take radical reflexivity to its logical conclusions.

*Nausea* tells us the story of a historian, Antoine Roquentin, who, seized by and extreme existentialism, often feels nauseated when the world around him appears to be something strange, ugly, alien, and devoid of coherence or meaning. Through a growing awareness of his senses and body in relation to objects and people, Roquentin comes to conceive of them in their radical otherness and ceases to discern meaning or beauty in the world's entities. As a consequence, he is forced to refocus the perception of his own existence on himself and his body. It is not a circle but a vicious spiral: the more Roquentin lends himself to reflect on the subjective experiences and sensations caused by objects and by people he sees around him, the more his strangeness and distance from those entities increase; and the greater the otherness of the world, the less likely he feels connected with it and the greater the urgency to turn inwards and differentiate himself from it. Through Roquentin, we are offered a glimpse into how radical reflexivity can mutate into a trigger not only for estrangement from the world but also for moral inflexibility and individualism. His pathological scepticism concerning the possibility of seeing order, meaning or beauty in others and the world is already a symptom of such individualism. Roquentin seems always to be eager to express his contempt for people in general, for they do not realise that existence is contingent and gratuitous. He knows it; they do not. The anchoring of his own existence in himself and his sensory and bodily experience of differentiation towards others seems to offer him a clear understanding of what existence is; an understanding which, apparently, other people do not possess. In the end, the scepticism that consumes him does little more than to feed his ego, certifying that he holds the means to discern what no one else can: the world's crude and gratuitous essence.

Such a nihilistic condition has an almost surreal dimension to it.<sup>3</sup> However, it allows us to have something tangible to reflect upon. Roquentin's example does not mean to imply that an anthropology that takes subjectivity, the senses or embodiment as objects of reflection will necessarily turn into an extreme version of existentialism. However, the premise that cuts across them – that is, the subject as the epistemological, moral and rhetorical locus of knowledge production – if taken to its logical consequence, will end up reinforcing a feeling of estrangement from the world and/or differentiation from others. In a certain sense, we cannot be surprised at a growing feeling of the world's radical alterity if we continue to conceive of knowledge about the human being as a collection of the manifold and infinite ways in which, as individuals, we differ from one another in the moulding and shaping of our subjectivity, experience or body. The picture that seems to derive from this has been astutely sketched by

Zygmunt Bauman (2001: 124–25) concerning the praise of the ‘aesthetic’ dimension of individual and cultural difference:

Yes, there is a cacophony of voices and no tune is likely to be sung in unison, but do not worry: no tune is necessarily better than the next, and if it were, there wouldn’t at any rate be a way of knowing it – so feel free to sing (compose, if you can) your own tune (you won’t add to the cacophony anyway; it is already deafening and one more tune won’t change anything).

### **Ethics at the limits of the individual**

From the genealogy sketched above, one gets the idea that, in an attempt to leave behind the reification and the (supposed) objectivism of classical theories, contemporary anthropology gradually readjusted the core of their concerns to the autonomy, fluidity and inconstancy of the subject and its inner sphere. In other words, the critical rejection (not only understandable but justified) of the assumption that human beings uncritically replicate a cultural order extrinsic to them which can be explained with a structural and functional rhetoric has led to the adoption of the individual as the epistemological, rhetorical and moral locus of knowledge production.

In the case of anthropology, as we have seen, the individual and its subjectivity tend to emerge recursively in various contemporary reflections, occupying a place which, albeit not always explicit, remains the paradigm on the basis of which a good part of its theoretical and ethnographic considerations are thought out, articulated and constructed. As a paradigm, it seems to reinforce the feeling that we are moving away from outdated anthropological reifications, such as ‘social fact’, ‘superorganic’, ‘structure’, ‘function’, ‘pattern’ and so on; by this same move, it allows us to incorporate and dilute, at last, the individual’s freedom and autonomy in the anthropological theory itself. It goes with saying that the move away from such anthropological reifications is not the problem. The problem lies in seeing the individual’s self-interpretations, subjectivity, will and autonomy as a proper alternative. In the absence of gods to guide us and in the face of the inadequacy of scientific presuppositions to the humanities, a new ground for certainty is being erected over the ruins of autonomous, self-reflecting subjects.

A paradigmatic example of such move can be seen in James Laidlaw’s work (2002; 2014) on virtue ethics within the so called ‘ethical turn’ in anthropology (e.g. Faubion, 2011; Mattingly, 2012). In it, we can identify yet another step in the genealogy presented above. The main goal in Laidlaw’s work is, in short, to overthrow and overcome the ‘science of unfreedom’: by and large, a science that follows Durkheim in ‘equating morality with the social’ (2014: 21). In order to correct this misunderstanding, Laidlaw wants to turn the notion of ‘freedom’ into a core concept in anthropological reflections on ethics – the whole rationale behind his work *The Subject of Virtue*. Here, however, a problematic duality remains: society’s coercion as the problem, and individual autonomy as the solution. There is no doubt that the notions of ‘individual’ and ‘society’ are central to sociological thinking from its

inception. But an approach to the ethical and moral dimensions of human existence that places the subject, its subjectivity, autonomy and freedom as a paradigm, or methodological principle, seems to be nothing more than a mirror-image of what it seeks to liberate itself from. The paradigm of ‘moral codes’ is simply replaced by its opposite, the paradigm of ‘ethical subjects’.

Nevertheless, even more central to our argument than to show its subjectivist orientation, is the fact that such an orientation, concerned as it is with the ethical and moral domains, seems to lead to a rather shallow and distorted view of the human condition and of how human beings cope with ethical and moral issues. In practice, there is *not* a real choice to be made between ‘morality as social’ and ‘individual freedom’, for human lives are most of the time much more intricate and complex than that.

Some anthropologists working on ethics and morality have already accounted for this complexity. While some have specifically pointed out the problems with ethical and moral accounts grounded on the figure of the individual, its freedom and subjectivity (Dyring, 2018; Fassin, 2012: 8; 2014; Keane, 2014), others have offered a more nuanced account of ethics which rejects the rigid dichotomy between ‘freedom’ and ‘convention’ (Lambek, 2015; Robbins, 2007, 2016); which looks into ethics in ‘ordinary’ instances of life where such dichotomy is yet to become a theoretical issue (Das, 2015; Lambek, 2010); or which captures the moral breakdowns involved in the ethical domain (Zigon, 2007).

The purpose of bringing this discussion into the domain of ethics is not to engage directly and critically with this subfield of anthropology; nor to deal with ethics or morality as a subject matter in itself. The purpose is merely to point to a domain where one can most clearly see (as a close reading from the works above attest) the limitations of a discourse grounded on the individual and subjective dimensions of human beings. The truth is that what we usually call ethics or morality is always-already constituted by an intricate patchwork of free, autonomous choices and decisions, *but also* of ‘unfree’ actions of obligation, resignation or subordination. Ethics, or morality, prior to being an arena for individual thought and behaviour – with its reasons and justifications for action, or lack of it – are the mesh in which humans find themselves always-already intertwined, that pulls and stretches them towards others and the world. In other words, that which constitutes the ethical domain does not so much present itself to the ‘ethical subject’ as *a problem to solve* but operates most of the time as something which is already-there exerting some tension or pressure on the individual, impelling it to act, demanding responsibilities, duties or obligations from it. As Wentzer (2018: 223) puts it, in arguing for a ‘paradigm of responsiveness’ in anthropology, ‘[r]esponding means to only have the second word, not to be in the position to initiate one’s doings, but having to answer the requests that come from elsewhere or from somebody else, from a place that notoriously withdraws itself into the blind spots of our intentional awareness as well as of our normative entitlements’. This is not a deterministic observation (the ethical sphere does not work as to *determine* individual action, albeit it can, and most of the times does, *condition* it), but a simple and plain observation concerning the mode in which human lives work in the world, prior to anthropological, sociological or philosophical theory.



Ethics and morality are better seen as domains where individuals are consistently pushed against the limits of speech, thought, reason. Not that they are thoroughly ineffable, unintelligible or irrational domains (although they *can* be), but that we seem always to be at pains at rendering them into a rational, logical and conceptual discourse. What we normally refer to as ethics, morality, as well as its problems or dilemmas, is better understood as something which seems to lie beyond the individual's ability to generate rational, coherent, logical thought processes. It is certainly not a domain that forms itself externally and independently of human worlds, but neither is it something that human beings can ever make explicit with the clarity of a philosophical argument. In many cases one seems to be pushed consistently against the walls of language when asked to give reasons for action, rationalize behaviour or find an acceptable solution for ethical problems.

In the ethical and moral domains, then, one usually comes face to face with *one's own limitations, as individuals and humans* – and it is this small but crucial aspect that seems to be overlooked in most forms of contemporary subjectivist anthropology, whether concerning ethics or some other field of inquiry. It seems that we are always aiming at total intelligibility of causes, reasons and explanations for action, when, in fact, most of the time our own being and modes of being have inherent limitations in what they can make transparent to themselves.

An illustrative example to grasp what is at stake here can be seen in how Greek tragedy can offer a profound account of human limitations, precisely because it does not resort to reflections grounded on individuality, subjectivity and freedom. In tragedy, the issue is not only about great tragic dilemmas and suffering, but about the mature realisation that individuals seem always to be pushed against a metaphysical wall when faced with ethical problems, big or small. In a kind of myth metamorphosed into fiction, tragedy offers human beings a sharp look at the depth of the dilemmas and fragilities that beset them, thus instructing them about the complexity of their own condition. Each one with its own plot and characters, Greek tragic plays have at their essence and purpose the action itself, the unfolding of events, their unpredictability and inevitability, and not in the psychological unity, subjectivity or freedom of their characters (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1988: 34–35). The thickness of the action and plot does not materialise so much as a particular story with particular characters and circumstances. Rather, the heart of tragedy, and that which it tells us about, is the ethical dilemma itself, in all its existential harshness, and not the reflexive autonomy of its characters. It is the texture weaved by the unfolding of events, it is the dilemma's blatant insolubility that, more than two thousand years later, continues to give life and substance to *Antigone* or *Oresteia*. As Jaeger (1946: 254, 257) observed about Aeschylus, 'In his tragedies man is not the chief problem: man is merely the vehicle of destiny, and that destiny is the real problem'. – that is, 'the effect of the destiny upon the soul'.

Confronted with the plot is an audience being recurrently invited to formulate a judgement, only to be exposed in a later moment, through the voice of the chorus, to the true complexity of the situation and thus have the certainty of its previous judgments undermined. Should Antigone have simply obeyed Creon's order and watched her brother putrefy and be devoured by birds and wild animals, and in so doing, place the polis

and the law above family ties? Should Creon have forgiven Antigone for burying her brother against the law? And should the polis and its king downplay violations to the law when they are justified by personal reasons? Or, at the opening of *Oresteia*, should Agamemnon have sacrificed his own daughter, as he eventually did, to secure victory in the Trojan War? Or should he, alternatively, have rejected the sacrifice, defied the gods and seen his people exterminated by the Trojans? If we reflect seriously on the questions, there is no obvious answer without a 'but'. We can effectively tend towards either choice (today, we would all certainly stand by Antigone's courage and would not sacrifice a person in the name of an ideal), but both carry with them the promise of inevitable and distressing consequences.

*Oresteia* is a fine example of decision-making in the face of an ethical dilemma and the repercussion of its consequences over time. The whole trilogy aims to set before its audience, most clearly and crudely, the shadowy depths of the ethical sphere, of the choices that fracture and divide a single man or woman; and the whole narrative is built on this play between the inevitability of the decisions to be made – Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, the latter's murder by Clytemnestra and Orestes' matricide – and the consequences of making them. What lies at the heart of *Oresteia*, then, is not Agamemnon, Clytemnestra or Orestes, but the narrative that runs through all these characters: the entanglement of human lives and choices and their respective consequences depicted in tragic and irremediable outlines. Through its narrativist nature, tragedy leaves its audience with an uncertainty proper to those who finally contemplate both sides of the dilemma and thus hesitate to give a definite answer – 'The questions are posed but tragic consciousness can find no fully satisfactory answers to them, and so they remain open' (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1988: 33).

Its unsolvable nature, its ambiguity and the absence of a categorical solution are, all things considered, what bestows tragedy with its existential depth and its distinctive ethical and moral richness; they are what enables tragedy to speak to human beings about themselves, to teach them about their own condition. Tragedy had, in fact, an educative role in Greek society (e.g. Croally, 2005). However, such role did not consist in offering the audience final elucidations, clear and definitive answers. Tragedy's teaching and message is the dilemma itself, personalized in a particular case, to be sure, but still without a clear answer or resolution. *Here I present you with this dilemma* – the tragediographer would eventually think – *now it is up to you to reflect and debate on it, weighing pros and cons, weaving arguments for either side, reaching, in the end and despite the effort, a poor and unenlightening conclusion*. It was the tragediographer's task, and consequently the virtue and ultimate teaching of tragedy, to provide an understanding of the problem *as a problem*, but not to solve it. As George Steiner (1980: 8–9) wrote,

Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited and that no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance. Outside and within man is *l'autre*, the 'otherness' of the world. Call it what you will: a hidden or malevolent God, blind fate, the solicitations of hell, or the brute fury of our animal blood. It waits for us in ambush at crossroads. It mocks us and destroys us. In certain rare instances it leads us after destruction to some incomprehensible repose.

There is something in Greek tragedy that points to human limitations and frailties. The ancient Greeks seemed to resort to the arts, such as poetry or tragedy, or to religion in order to articulate a sense of human limitations and to make them somehow intelligible and tangible. This reference to Greek tragedy should not be taken as a suggestion to follow the same path. Rather, it is meant to put forth the idea that the fixation with subjectivity, reflexivity and autonomy in subjectivist contemporary anthropology seems to be driving anthropologists away from a more serious acknowledgment of *human finitude*, or limitations: not the temporal and biological limits of human beings (death), but the frailties and practical, analytic and moral limits inhering in human existence.

### Accepting finitude

With a reformulation of philosophy's presuppositions concerning the human being, as well as a profound transformation of its language, Martin Heidegger managed to bring to light – what he saw as – the misunderstanding perpetuated by Western philosophy. According to the German philosopher, Western philosophy has always taken for granted the meaning of 'Being' without never asking what it means 'to be'. In other words, it usually moves at an ontic level, defining entities with reference to *what they are*, their tangible presence, characteristics, properties and so on; but never taking the time to ask what it means to say that they *are*. Hence, it mistakenly reduces human beings to an anthropomorphic, self-contained entity characterized by an inner essence, consciousness, presence and will; therefore equating the human being to an 'I' and a subject with a tangible and corporeal presence and never inquiring into its *mode of being*.

Even in Edmund Husserl's phenomenological project, with the 'return to things themselves' and the rejection of the Kantian and neo-Kantian direction of philosophy, the 'I' preserves its role as the ultimate and pre-social foundation of consciousness. By contrast, what grounds Heidegger's thought – and this is clear in his later works on art, poetry, language and the act of dwelling (e.g. [1959] 1971; 1971) – is no longer the speech of the cogito, of the reflective 'I', armed with will and consciousness, but the language of being. In other words, it is not a speaking that exhales the individual's will and consciousness (Dasein is, after all, 'care', Ger., *Sorge*, and not subjectivity), but a saying that summons up and makes manifest our entanglement in the world and what we primarily are: finite and situated human beings.<sup>4</sup> Philosophies and theories that speak about the humanity of human beings but take the subject as its foundation and, thus, as the substratum of that which they intend to say, disregard the fact that the subject that takes itself and the world as the object of theoretical reflection is not only a recent figure, forced by the transmigration of scientific thought to the sphere of the human sciences, but also does not correspond to how, proximally and for the most part, we come to find ourselves in the world. The depth, liveliness and meaningfulness that constitute the core of every human life come forth not because – and when – we are subjects or theoretical inquirers, but when the subject in us is still to come and we find ourselves there-in-the-world, absorbed in and coping with the unfolding of life, its tasks and its demands on us. This is, for Heidegger, the way we fundamentally are: always-already imbued by some

dimension of the world we inhabit, to the point that what primarily characterises us is not the fact that we inhabit worlds, but that worlds inhabit us.

Heidegger's thought has diverse and profound implications for anthropology, especially his non-dualistic view of human practical absorption and engagement in-the-world. Ingold (2000), for example, has developed Heidegger's view on the act of *dwelling* in several of his reflections, while Weiner (2001), fully applying Heidegger's views on language and relationality to his works about the Foi people, has even called for a 'Heideggerian anthropology'. More recently, there has been a fruitful dialogue with Heidegger's key phenomenological concepts as a way to relocate the ethical sphere from the 'individual' to the 'relation' (Throop, 2014; Zigon, 2007, 2014, 2021), or as a way to frame the ethnographic encounter (Dyring, 2015).

This article's turn to Heidegger walks in a slightly different direction. Not because it opposes the already existing works, but because it approaches Heidegger from a broader perspective (human finitude) and with a different goal (a critique of subjectivism) and, therefore, can be seen as somehow complementary to such works. The whole purpose with the discussion that follows, then, is not to call for a Heideggerian anthropology, nor to apply and develop some of Heidegger's specific concepts within anthropology, or the domain of ethics or morality. Rather, it should be read as an attempt to draw from Heidegger's pathbreaking understanding of human beings some of its anti-subjectivist implications for a serious acknowledgment of human finitude and the limitations of human existence in anthropological reflection.

Heidegger's thought can be safely characterized as a philosophy of finitude (e.g. Stambaugh, 1992; or Carel, 2007). Such finitude, however, does not concern only death as an inevitable fact, a limit and, thus, as an existential problem causing angst in human beings.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the sense of finitude that runs across Heidegger's thought also stems from how he characterizes human beings as *Dasein*, and from how, in later writings, he develops several reflections where priority is given to the situated character of human beings within tradition, place or language without ever taking the individual and its subjectivity as the driving force of those reflections. What we can take as the bigger picture of his philosophy is that the historically and linguistically situated character of human beings comes forth not only as that which constitutes their possibilities and modes of being, but also as that which traces the (positive) limits of their existence.

In *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Heidegger wrote: 'More primordial than man is the finitude of the *Dasein* in him' (1968: 237). Here we have two fundamental aspects that infuse Heidegger's thought and that will guide our discussion. The first is that the words '*Dasein*' and 'human'(man)<sup>6</sup> do not refer to the same entity; *Dasein* is not even an entity, but something that *constitutes* human beings. Moreover, we are told that *Dasein* is finite, has limits or limitations, and that such finitude is much more fundamental to human beings than the fact that they *are* human. Let us first clarify the first aspect: what is *Dasein*, after all, if it is not just a different (or better) word that points to what was previously referred to as 'human being'?

As we have seen above, *Dasein* stands for 'being-there' and it refers not to humans themselves but to their *mode of being* – the fundamental question is not '*what is a human being?*' but '*how is a human being?*'<sup>7</sup>

Whether this entity [Dasein] 'is composed of' the physical, psychic, and spiritual and how these realities are to be determined is here left completely unquestioned. We place ourselves in principle outside of this experiential and interrogative horizon outlined by the definition of the most customary name for this entity, man: *homo animal rationale*. What is to be determined is not an outward appearance of this entity but from the outset and throughout solely *its way to be*, not the what of that of which it is composed but *the how of its being and the characters of this how*. (Heidegger, [1979] 1985: 154)

Thus, Dasein is not the human *as* a biological, corporeal or psychological being, but the human *as* a horizon of intelligibility. As Heidegger writes 'Dasein brings its 'there' along with it. [...] *Dasein is its disclosedness*'. ([1927] 1962: §133) In other words, human beings are the horizon of intelligibility (anthropologists would perhaps call it 'cultural horizon') that they themselves open. It is not that they are the disclosers of such a horizon, but that in their mode of being they *are* that horizon, they bring it with them. With this, Heidegger is no longer approaching human beings as entities characterized by essence, will or presence, but by a particular mode of being through which a nexus of meanings is opened up and projected. In the perspective presented by Heidegger, humans are fundamentally *intelligibility* and *understanding* and are not reducible to a particular tangible, corporeal and subjective being.

But Dasein is also more than a characterisation of our mode of being – it is an observation concerning the limits and boundaries of who and how we are. This leads us to the second aspect. According to Heidegger, Dasein's finitude, that is, the finitude of our horizon of intelligibility, is something much more fundamental to what we are than the fact that we *are* Dasein. Being Dasein, as being-there, presupposes the existence of a 'there' into which the human being is *thrown* (Ger., *Geworfenheit*) ([1927] 1962, sec. §38); a 'there' which, in its complexity and non-transparency, is shared with others; where very little is selected by us and the possibilities of what to be and how to be are not of our own making. However, human finitude, as that which derives from the fact that we are *thrown*, albeit conceived as the limits and limitations in human existence, should not be taken as a negative aspect, as constraint or obstruction. Limits, limitations or finitude are not aspects to be overcome, but the fundamental condition of possibility of Dasein. Dasein is, fundamentally, intelligibility and understanding; and all that is intelligible and graspable has to have limits. Something can only be said to be intelligible if it emerges within certain boundaries, or limits. Heidegger's favourite idea to express this is the 'clearing' (Ger., *die Lichtung*) (see e.g. Stambaugh, 1992: 35–41). Without entering into too much detail, the 'clearing' works as a topological metaphor meant to convey the idea that at the end of a forest path, a defined and limited arena opens up where, finally, something can be present and encountered. The limits and boundaries in the clearing, or in Dasein's intelligibility, are never a hindrance or restriction, but that which allows something to show up and be intelligible within a given horizon. As he writes in *The Origin of the Work of Art* ([1936] 1971: 51):

That which is can only be, as a being, if it stands within and stands out within what is lighted in this clearing. Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are.

Our finitude, then, comes from the ontological fact that prior to being corporeal subjects and centres of consciousness (*i*) we are a horizon of intelligibility whose limits are traced by history, tradition, language and culture, that (*ii*) such horizon is better understood as something that is given to us – for we are *thrown into it* – rather than created, and (*iii*) it conveys a positive aspect, insofar as only by existing within limits, limitations and finitude can things be bearable and intelligible for human beings.

What Heidegger is trying to convey by giving some kind of ontological priority to Dasein's finitude is the fact that, because our mode of being is primarily characterised by intelligibility and understanding, and not by presence, essence and will, we humans are fundamentally and positively constituted by the fact that we have limits, or limitations, in our practices, in our thinking and sense making abilities. Moreover, to acknowledge that we are characterised by a horizon of intelligibility that is finite, leads inevitably to the recognition that to make explicit, to clarify, or to make totally transparent to ourselves that which grounds our Dasein and the historical and linguistic beings we are is not, and never will be, within the subject's reach.

## **Anthropology and human finitude – final remarks**

Contemporary forms of subjectivist and reflexive anthropology, with their steady move away from culture and society and towards the self-obsessed individual, tend to obscure and pass over the limitations and frailties of our human nature. Consequently, they are losing the ability, or the interest, to even consider human finitude, to bear it in mind, to articulate it, and to make it pervade their reflections and inquiries as something which constitutes the very texture of human lives and worlds. Part of the reason behind that withdrawal from finitude was already identified long ago and we should not even take it with astonishment and surprise: was it not we, after all, as Nietzsche wrote in *The Gay Science*, who *drank up the sea, who wiped away the entire horizon, who loosened the earth from its sun and now stray as through an infinite nothing?* Have we not killed God? The loss of an awareness of human finitude seems to be related to the burden we must bear for having apparently committed the greatest murder in the history of thought. Except that the death of God did not bring us the in-finitude, or emancipation, that would hypothetically come with the absence of the sea, the horizon, or with the separation of the earth from its sun – but only a false sense of freedom. That is why it is a burden: the burden is to carry a feeling of infinite potentiality without actually having it. In truth, we have never ceased to be finite beings, we have only lost the ability, the discernment, the tact to articulate it, to bring it into our midst, whatever its forms.

Regardless of its deeper metaphysical reasons, the fact is that, from a broader perspective, there is not a pervasive acknowledgment of human finitude in anthropology; by being too absorbed in recording every instant and gesture of agency and reflexivity and grounding them in the *self*, the body or the senses, it recklessly overlooks both the

existential fragilities and limitations inhering in human beings. 'Recklessly' because without a reflection on the human properly grounded on finitude, anthropologists gradually move away from an adequate understanding of what – and how – humans are towards the idea that in our own individualities, subjectivities and bodies lies a sufficient bedrock for certainty as to what things are, were or can be. The more we take the individual as the cause and driving force not only of the very act of existence but of the inquiry into existence, the more we alienate ourselves from any hint of finitude and the more we deceive ourselves with the delusion that each one of us is the very ground and foundation of oneself.

But the individual is never its own ground. Rather, what grounds it is the very movement of transcendence into the 'there' that characterises human beings: the opening, extending and unfolding towards the world, interpreting and acquiring from it the meaning and order of things, as well as the horizon of intelligibility where things show themselves as what they are. This 'movement of transcendence', however, indicates here not a leap into a realm outside the human, but precisely the opposite. Human beings exist in and through a movement of transcendence of themselves insofar as, because they are always-already engaged with the world's entities and tasks, they belong to the world before belonging to themselves. Transcendence means, therefore, the very mode of being human *as* the movement of attending, coping, responding and opening up to the world (see Heidegger, [1929] 1998). To exist is, for human beings, to transcend themselves, and in the same gesture in which they predispose themselves towards the world, the world gives itself to humans as that in relation to which they constitute their – always culturally and historically different – modes of being.

So, when it is said that the individual is never its own ground, we are pointing to the same problem expressed above concerning the unfolding of a subjectivist paradigm in anthropological discourse. What sustains individual human beings is not an entity, a centre of consciousness or a first cause (whether the transcendental 'I', the self, the person, or the subject with its reflexivity and body) from which one can build a neatly systematised theory or description which elucidates human action, but the unfolding and the happening that the human being itself is. But precisely because what sustains it is not, after all, an entity, or substance but the practical, pragmatic, immersive happening of its own existence, that which constitutes its *ground* seems always to elude reflection and remains persistently hidden. So, while it is true that the conscious reflection over the reasons, conditions and possibilities of its own existence constitutes the primary distinctiveness of human beings, it is also true that such ability is also the very conundrum in which they always find themselves: it is the greatest of human capacities, as well as the most ineffable of their limitations.

What lies in the paradigm that feeds into the anthropological genealogy from which this article started, however, seems to be a lack of recognition of this conundrum that we inevitably are. That which moves the reflections centred on the self, subjectivity, the body, the senses, and the 'ethical subject' is like a grand metaphysical gesture of narcissistic self-examination, whereby we assume that to understand human beings is to uncover and dissect our subjective, reflexive, or psychological

foundations, our bodies and senses, or both. Foucault (1999: 272) summed up this post-modern condition when he asked, adopting Freud's expression 'narcissistic wounds',

whether one could not say that Freud, Nietzsche and Marx, by involving us in a task of interpretation that always reflects back on itself, have not constituted around us, and for us, these mirrors in which we are given back images whose perennial wounds form our narcissism today.

As *experience turned onto itself*, such interpretations seem to be the human being's latest attempt at controlling and carving its own destiny by trying to render the foundations of its existence into intelligible reasons, causes, explanations and conceptual elements; and thus, to dispose of limits.

This article, on the other hand, proposes a thorough acceptance of limits and human finitude by making them bear upon our anthropological reflections and the knowledge one aims to produce concerning the human condition. This does not mean, however, that anthropologists should attempt to frame human finitude in yet another theoretical and conceptual apparatus towards some kind of *anthropology of finitude*. If we recall Heidegger's observation that our finitude is something that constitutes us and thus more primordial than the fact that we *are* humans, then an 'anthropology of finitude' would be a tautology, akin to an 'anthropology of human beings'. Human finitude, as it is conceived here, is not a thing, an object for thought or a phenomenon that we can discern, interpret or explain, like kinship, a ritual, an institution or any other collective or individual action; rather, it constitutes and conditions, it sets up and enacts our understanding of all things, all human phenomena, all actions by delimiting them and thus allowing them to be intelligible and bearable. Being our most fundamental ontological fact, human finitude is something that pervades all our existence, limiting our reason, understanding and practices when coping with others and the world.

Making human finitude bear upon our anthropological accounts of cultures, societies, groups or human beings, then, is not to think about and reason out human finitude as such, but to acknowledge it, accept it and build our reflections from *inside* finitude. In other words, it is not to take limits and finitude as aspects to be theorized, dissected and thus uncovered and unconcealed, but, as Weiner (2001: 8) puts it when summarizing his application of Heidegger's thought to anthropology, 'to restore the positive aspects of concealment'; that is, to *start from* them, to begin from within that which the limits (both the anthropologist's and that of those with which s/he works!) first disclose and warrant. What would guide an anthropological inquiry (regardless of its theoretical perspective, subject matter or object) which positively accepts the finite and limited character of human modes of being would certainly not be the attempt to render the ground and foundation of human practices conceptually or theoretically intelligible, let alone to anchor them in the figure of the individual. Instead, it would be an effort to attend to and interpret the shared horizon of intelligibility that we are and to inquire into the movement of openness and responsiveness which informs our relational modes of being human (e.g. Santos Alexandre 2022). Additionally, an anthropology with an eye on human finitude would



not so much be focused on human beings *qua* physical and psychological beings, possessing will, autonomy and a body, but with human beings *qua* horizon of intelligibility or understanding; and would inquire into the human condition from within the fullness of language, myth and poetry, art and craft, and the meanings which are disclosed and put into work by them. Finally, an anthropology that acknowledges, accepts and moves within human finitude fully concedes that there is always something in what we are that precedes the individuals and subjects we yearn to be – and starts from there.

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### Notes

1. Although Rapport's purpose (with his 'post-cultural anthropology') is similar to Abu-Lughod's (the emphasis on the experiences and meanings built by singular individuals in particular moments), his proposal differs from the latter's in that Rapport aims to completely dispose of any 'reifying' notion such as culture, society, class, discourse, habitus or others.
2. Two arguments analogous to Heidegger's Enframing can be mentioned here. Charles Taylor, for example, argues, with respect to the history of the self in Western thought, that radical objectivism and radical subjectivism are, albeit apparently in paradoxical ways, two sides of the same coin (Taylor 1989: 173–76). Bunzl (2008), on the other hand, states that contemporary forms of anthropology remain hostage to a positivist slant. For Bunzl, by rejecting the generalizations made by their predecessors about an inherently complex and plural world, anthropology has committed itself to the idea that it must offer the reader a precise portrait of that plurality and complexity. In a quest for exhaustively recording the differences resting at the individual and the subjective, anthropology perpetuates and magnifies the positivist slant of classical theories.
3. One should note, however, that in Antoine Roquentin lies the seed of the existentialist philosophy that Sartre will develop, in 1943, in *Being and Nothingness*.
4. For a detailed discussion of Heidegger's approach to language, see Ziarek (2013) or Allen (2007).
5. Thompson (2013) has argued that because Heidegger's Dasein does not refer to an anthropomorphic, physical and psychological being, 'death' is not so much the biological and temporal limits of human beings, but situations of 'world collapse', that is, lack of intelligibility.
6. From now on, we will use 'human' instead of 'man' when referring to this specific quote.
7. This is the crux behind the 'ontological difference': the difference between 'beings' (Ger., *Seiendes*) and 'being' (Ger., *Sein*), or between the 'whatness' of entities and their 'whoness', or *mode of being* (Heidegger [1975] 1982: 119–21). Or, as laid out by Heidegger in *Being*

and Time's introduction, the difference between an 'ontical inquiry' (concerned with an entity's specific tangible and formal aspects or characteristics) and an 'ontological inquiry' (concerned with an entity's *mode of being* and *disclosing* within intelligibility).

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