

Lacking what? On the *Welt-Umwelt* dichotomy in Heidegger and Gehlen

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Reception date: 1-3-2018
Acceptance date: 24-5-2018

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to focus on the *Umwelt-Welt* dichotomy by means of which Heidegger and Gehlen attempt to describe the grounds for the ontological difference between human and animal. Despite their profound differences, both Heidegger and Gehlen, due to their common belief in the ontological specificity of the human compared to the animal, assume as their own the classical metaphysical point of view according to which an appropriate definition of man's essence can only be attained by excluding every element of animality from humanity. On the basis of these premises, I criticize this theoretical assumption as shared by Heidegger's *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (1929-1930) and Gehlen's *Man. His Nature and Place in the World* (1940).

Keywords: animal philosophy; anthropocentrism; ontology; anthropological philosophy; animality

Resum. *Mancat de què? Sobre la dicotomia Welt-Umwelt en Heidegger i Gehlen*

L'objectiu d'aquest article és revisar la dicotomia *Welt-Umwelt* mitjançant la qual Heidegger i Gehlen pretenen fonamentar la diferència ontològica entre animal i humà. A causa de la creença compartida per ambdós autors en l'especificitat ontològica de l'humà davant la de l'animal, tant Heidegger com Gehlen, malgrat les profundes divergències que marquen els seus respectius punts de vista, acaben assumint com a propi el clàssic punt de vista metafísic segons el qual només en la mesura en què s'exclou en l'home tot element d'animalitat es pot finalment assolir una definició apropiada de la seva essència. Sobre la base d'aquestes premisses, es durà a terme una crítica d'aquest plantejament teòric tal com es manifesta en *Els conceptes fonamentals de la metafísica: món, finitud, solitud* de Heidegger (1929-1930) i en *L'home. La seva natura i la seva posició en el món* de Gehlen (1940).

Paraules clau: filosofia de l'animalitat; antropocentrisme; ontologia; antropologia filosòfica; animalitat

Summary

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0. The *Umwelt* in von Uexküll

My aim is to critically revise the philosophical use of the concept of *Umwelt* (environment) – developed by the biologist Jakob von Uexküll at the beginning of the 20th century (*Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*, 1909) – within the two frameworks of existentialism (Heidegger) and philosophical anthropology (Gehlen). In particular, I reflect on the anthropocentric perspective that conditions the philosophical appropriation of this biological concept by both thinkers. Nevertheless, before reflecting on Heidegger's and Gehlen's interpretation of the concept of *Umwelt*, we need to briefly revisit von Uexküll's definition of the animal *Umwelt* in order to provide background regarding these theoretical appropriations.¹

According to von Uexküll, the animal is a vital subject whose core activities are perceptual and operational. Hence, animal *Umwelt* is everything that the animal can perceive and can do. *Umwelt* is the synthesis between what the animal perceives in its environment – what von Uexküll calls its *Merkwelt* (perceptual world) – and what the animal can do about what it perceives, what von Uexküll calls *Wirkwelt* (operational world). What ranks as “object” in the human world, von Uexküll calls *Merkmalträger* (marks of significance) in the animal *Umwelt*, to indicate the vital role signalled by the animal's particular perceptions. Therefore, the operational world is the world in which the animal acts in response to marks of significance from its perceptual world. What this means is that the animal subject, in its specific environment, can differentiate between marks of significance, each of which potentially prompts an action. Consequently, if the animal is constituted to perceive very few marks, then it will only be able to perform very few vital operations; likewise, the more marks the animal is able to perceive, the more operations it will be able to perform in its environment.

In that line, as pointed out by von Uexküll in *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen* (1934), *Umwelt* represents the outer limit of animal life because only within this limit does the animal have access to whatever is biologically significant for it. As von Uexküll expressed it, the animal lives as if in a “soap bubble” that varies in size according to the perceptual-operational capacity of its species (von Uexküll, 1957: 24). The main task of biological theory lies therefore in the understanding of the close connection between the inner world of the animal organism, characterized by the permanent presence of endogenous excitations, and the external world, which is an inexhaustible source of vital signs allowing the organism to constantly interact through its specific system of receptor organs (*Merkorgan*) and effector organs (*Wirkorgan*).

The nuclear issue of this peculiar biological point of view consists in clearly differentiating a body conceived in terms of physical and chemical param-

1. For the conceptual history of “environment”, see “The Living and Its Milieu” in Canguilhem (2008: 98-120); especially about von Uexküll in Canguilhem (2008: 110-113).

eters, as the contemporary mechanist biology tries to do, from a living organism conceived like a subject acting specifically in its vital relationship with the environment. That is to say, the reciprocity that links the two polarities and gives them meaning defines the specific organism-environment relationship. For that reason, when von Uexküll uses the concept of *Umwelt* he is referring to this connection of perceptual world (*Merkwelt*) and effector world (*Wirkwelt*) resulting from the vital contact between the organism and its environment: “For all that a subject perceives becomes his perceptual world and all that he does, his effector world. Perceptual and effector worlds together form a close unit, the *Umwelt*” (von Uexküll, 1957: 6). The animal is therefore a subject capable of filtering the stimuli coming from the external world, orienting its vital responses in the form of actions on this same world. And this, in turn, shows us the organism as bearing the effects produced by the actions previously projected by the animal toward the external world. This means that each living species has its own organically formed reality and that it is consequently unacceptable to consider it as a physical-chemical object, as a material body devoid of individuality or vital subjectivity.

With this brief explanation of von Uexküll’s concept of *Umwelt*, we can now turn to its reinterpretation by Heidegger and Gehlen. As I will show, for Heidegger the animal is poor-in-world (*weltarm*) in the sense of being “lacking” because, due to its essence, the animal only has an *Umwelt* (understood as a “disinhibiting ring” that captivates it and which means it lives rather than exists); the human, on the other hand, as a linguistic-spiritual being that exists more than lives, is world-forming (*Weltbildend*). On the contrary, for Gehlen the human ontologically lacks *Umwelt* (understood as the self-enclosed life environment in which the animal lives in perfect attunement with its instincts), although it is thanks to this lack that the human can have a world (*Welt*) in which to historically and culturally “lead” a life.

However, the main issue I raise is that – independently of where the emphasis on “lack” is placed in the *Umwelt-Welt* bipolarity – the perspectives of Heidegger and Gehlen are revealed as theoretical strategies aimed at exorcising the presence of the animal in the human and the presence of the natural-biological in the historical-cultural. Both thinkers reveal themselves as being incapable of understanding the link between *Umwelt* and *Welt* as a very deep ontological nexus that unites animality and humanity. In my view, the understanding of this nexus is one of the most crucial issues in philosophy today.²

1. Heidegger: the animal lacking of *Welt*

As is known, the threefold argument put forward by Heidegger (1995) in his lectures of 1929-1930 (*Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*) defends the following theses: the stone is *weltlos* (worldless), the animal is *weltarm* (poor-in-

2. On the fundamental topic of the human-animal ontological relationship, and due to his highly innovative philosophical point of view, see Calarco (2015).

world) and the human is *weltbildend* (world-forming). The core concept is world (*Welt*) and it is this fundamental concept of metaphysics that Heidegger addresses in his lectures on animality:

By means of a comparative examination of our three theses (the stone is world-less, the animal is poor-in-world, man is world-forming) we hope to delimit in a provisional manner what we should understand by the term *world* in general, as well as the direction in which we should look for such understanding. (Heidegger, 1995: 185)

What is clear at first glance is Heidegger's emphasis on the centrality of the concept of *Welt*. Nonetheless, of particular note in relation to this threefold thesis is the ontologically selective nature of *Welt*. *Welt* is indeed at the centre of the trinity, acting as a theoretical axis around which the essence of humanity, of the vital-biological and of the physical-material are all defined. In other words, *Welt* is the metaphysical operator that marks the difference in essence between these three spheres of being and their corresponding modes of being. Defining the mode of being of stone, animal and human in terms of non-relationship, lacking relationship and relationship-forming separates the three into ontologically distinct realms of being. Thus, the mode of being of the human as world-forming is both irreducible to the poor-in-world mode of being of the animal (representing biological life) and to the worldlessness of the stone (representing inert matter). The importance of this threefold thesis lies precisely in the theoretical requirement of having to reject any gradualist notion of a fundamental biological continuity between the animal and the human that would contrast with the physical-material (Calarco, 2008, 18-24). The fundamental error, according to Heidegger, would be a failure to understand the essential difference that radically separates the human from the animal. In a concluding paragraph of his lectures on animality, Heidegger summarizes his reflections on this unbridgeable ontological gap between humanity and animality in terms of an "abyss", as follows:

Yet this is precisely the place where the decisive problem lies concealed and demands to be exposed. For it is *not* simply a question of a *qualitative otherness* of the animal world as compared with the human world, and especially not a question of quantitative distinctions in range, depth, and breadth – not a question of whether or how the animal takes what is given to it in a different way, but rather of whether the animal can apprehend something *as* something, something *as* a being, at all. If it cannot, then the animal is separated from man by an abyss. (Heidegger, 1995: 264)

These lines raise questions as follows: Does the animal have a capacity for understanding something as a being or for converting something into a being endowed with meaning as part of a totality that signifies *Welt*? Should this capacity be considered as absent in the animal in view of another reality regarding the world of beings, whose ontological status it should be possible to clarify precisely with reflections on animality? In line with Heidegger I

further ask: What kind of reality does the animal have access to? As we know, Heidegger's thesis regarding the animal mode of being in the world is that it is characterized by an essential "poverty". But what kind of poverty?

Heidegger refers to a lack, but this is not something that should be thought of in quantitative or qualitative terms of being poor in contrast with being rich, of having less in contrast with more:

Yet even here it is not merely a case of comparing what is less at one moment with what is more at another. In this context 'poor' implies having a *lack* [cur-sive mine] or insufficiency. Here too poverty represents a lacking or absence of something which could be present and generally ought to be present. (Heidegger, 1995: 195)

Heidegger, rather than holding a gradualist and continuous view, rejects the notion that the animal has access to a narrower fragment of world than the human. To reinforce this idea, he provides several examples of evident animal superiority to humans in terms of perceptual access to the world, referring, for instance, to the "discriminatory capacity of a falcon's eye" and "the canine sense of smell" (Heidegger, 1995: 194). If the animal has more privileged access to a world than is available to human perception, is it not richer rather than poorer regarding this access? So, what is it that the animal lacks by being poor-in-world? Precisely what or where is the lack? Heidegger formulates an answer to this question with the explicit intention of developing a genuine understanding of animality. And note, to be authentically philosophical, this understanding must follow a divergent path from that of continuity and gradualism, precisely because the latter would be incapable of clearly identifying the animality of the animal or the humanity of the human. From this basic premise, Heidegger turns his attention to research by one of the leading biologists of the day, namely, Jacob von Uexküll, whose notion of *Umwelt* furnished Heidegger with a valuable conceptual element in his denial of any form of gradual continuity between the animal and the human in their respective essences and ways of accessing the world.³

As will be seen below, Heidegger, on the basis of his philosophical use of empirical-descriptive data associated with the notion of *Umwelt*, depicts the closedness of the world implied by *Umwelt* in a far narrower sense, and he defines the essence of the animal (animality) through the concept of *Benommenheit* (captivation), as a way of revealing the poverty of the animal's mode of being

3. Note that Heidegger cited the second editions (respectively 1921 and 1928) of von Uexküll's works *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* (1909) and *Theoretische Biologie* (1921), since the subsequent and more influential *Streifzüge durch Umwelten und Menschen von Tieren* only became available in 1934 [translated to English as *A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men* in 1957]. For reasons of space, these texts and their place in von Uexküll's theoretical trajectory cannot be considered here, so I refer the reader to the essential work by Brentari (2015). See, too, Buchanan (2008: 7-38), Mazzeo (2010) and the Special Issue of *Semiotica* (2001) about von Uexküll.

with respect to the world.⁴ As has been rightly pointed out (Agamben, 2004: 51), von Uexküll's concepts of *Umwelt* and *Merkmalträger* were interpreted by Heidegger in terms of his own concepts of *Enthemmungsring* (disinhibiting ring) and *Enthemmende* (disinhibitor), respectively. Clarifying the meaning of this restrictive appropriation by Heidegger is decisive when considering the poor-in-world concept that Heidegger viewed as the essence of animality.

Let me now consider how this appropriation conditions the Heideggerian understanding of animality. As already implied in the extract cited above ("...whether the animal can apprehend something *as* something, something *as* a being ...", Heidegger, 1995: 264), the animal, locked into its own *Umwelt*, is not capable of acting in a world understood as a set of beings interlinked by a network of meanings. The poor-in-worldness of the animal (its "lack") is precisely its inability to objectify a being in its presence so as to convert it, through concepts, into an abstract element that would yield deeper meanings. Hence, permanently locked in as it is by stimuli from its own specific disinhibiting ring, the animal cannot distinguish between self and the other subsisting autonomously outside this self:

The behaviour of the animal, contrary to how it might appear, does not and never can relate to *present-at-hand* things singly or collectively. Rather, the animal surrounds itself with a *disinhibiting ring* which prescribes what can affect or occasion its behaviour. Since this self-encirclement belongs to the animal, it always intrinsically bears its disinhibiting ring along with it and does so as long as it is alive. Or more precisely – the life of the animal is precisely the struggle [*Ringen*] to maintain this encircling ring or sphere within which a quite specifically articulated manifold of disinhibitions can arise. (Heidegger, 1995: 255)

Heidegger's view is that the vital actions of the animal cannot be compared to the existential actions of the human as being-in-the-world. The lizard basking on a stone does not know that the stone is stone "as such", or that the sun is sun "as such", or that its basking is the action of basking "as such". The lizard, rather, relates to the stone because this has the function of indicating a default instinctive reaction (namely, hot surfaces trigger physical and chemical processes necessary for the survival of cold-blooded animals). In other words, it lies on the stone because the stone is a disinhibiting stimulus in its pre-determined vital programme (Heidegger, 1995: 197). The lizard acts this way simply because the perception and action are both written into its instinctual structure as an innate capacity to satisfy a certain instinct:

Now if something resembling a *surrounding environment* [*Umwelt*] is *open* for the animal and its behaviour, we must now ask whether it is possible to clarify this any further. Instinctual and subservient capability for [...] the totality of its self-absorbed capability, is an interrelated driven-ness of the instinctual

4. On this topic, see Brentari (2015: 198-204), Buchanan (2008: 39-114), Calarco (2008: 15-53), Cimatti (2013: 7-33), and more extensively Bassanese (2004).

drives which encircle the animal. It does so in such a way that it is precisely this *encirclement* which makes possible the behaviour in which the animal is related to other things. *Related to other things* – although *these other things are not manifest as beings*. Capability for [...] is not a matter of comportment toward beings. (Heidegger, 1995: 253-254)

The world of the human as a receptacle of meanings is thus closed to the animal. This closure affects the animal in its essence because its being poor-in-world means it lacks the ability to open up to “as suchness”. In other words, the world that is closed off to the animal as a consequence of its own ontological structure is closed off to the extent that this world can only be understood in light of the manifestation of the truth latent in the being, which, in turn, is understood to be the ontological prerogative of the human. That is, it is impossible for the animal to understand the Being of the being, because it is incapable of opening up to the manifestness of being “as” being. What motivates the encircled behaviour of the animal is not the openness of a world, but rather the pressure of a disinhibitor – as recognized by the animal’s instinctual structure – that relieves the animal from the inhibition keeping it locked in.

If for Heidegger “living means: being in an animal kind of way”, then the animal “does not exist but merely lives” (Heidegger, 1995: 210) – just as it sees but does not observe, and hears but does not listen. We might also add that since the animal merely lives, then it corresponds to the human to exist rather than just live, because, unlike what happens with the human, it is impossible for the animal to link actions to a self-conscious individuality, to a *Selbst* confronted with a world of meanings:

Every animal surrounds itself with this disinhibiting ring, and not merely subsequently once the animal has already been living for a certain period of time, because this encircling belongs to the innermost organization of the animal and its fundamental morphological structure. The way in which the animal is in each case taken by the whole is directed by the range of possible disinhibitions within its encirclement. Such being taken is open for manifold forms of disinhibition, but this openness is precisely not the manifestness of anything that behaviour could relate to as beings. This open being taken intrinsically involves the withholding of any possibility of apprehending beings. This self-encircling entails an open absorption in it – not in the so called ‘interior’ of the animal, but in the ring of the interrelated drivenness of instinctual drives as they open themselves up. (Heidegger, 1995: 255)

What defines animal life, therefore, is a functional capacity to behave in accordance with an external environment, and an inability to act consciously on the basis of a fundamental distinction between self and other – as is characteristic of the human – given that the animal is motivated solely by pre-formed instincts. For Heidegger the animal is ultimately locked into its instinct and, therefore, can never be aware of the totality of being “as” subsisting being, merely of the occasion of instinctual relief addressed to fulfilling its predetermined vital programme. According to him, it is this absolute *Benommenheit*

(captivation) regarding its disinhibiting ring that defines the essence of animality. With no possibility of perceiving anything “as such”, the animal is considered poor-in-world; it lacks the ability to perceive being in the sense of the manifestness of beings:

To say that captivation is the essence of animality means: *The animal as such does not stand within a manifestness of beings. Neither its so-called environment nor the animal itself are manifest as beings*. (Heidegger, 1995: 248)

More radically, however, as underlined by Agamben (2004: 59), for Heidegger the animal cannot have a closed understanding of the world because the world “as such” has never been open to it. The animal, in fact, lives beyond any possibility of alternating between world openness and closedness, because it lacks the world as a manifestation of being to which it may or may not have access. So, captivated in a disinhibiting ring, inside which it is incapable of distinguishing between its own vital and disinhibiting behaviours, the only reality to which it is open is essentially that of the uninhibited, or relief, instinct. The animal, in other words, is captivated by the disinhibiting ring that encircles it and which it can never escape as long as it lives. This would imply, then, that the environment of animal life and the world of human existence are irreducible one to the other, to the point that they should be thought of as being separated by an unbridgeable ontological abyss.⁵

In conclusion, it can be argued that Heidegger, in affirming the specificity of human essence as compared to animal essence, adopts the characteristic anthropogenic approach of our metaphysical tradition, according to which, in order to think as proper to the human, we need to proceed comparatively and generate a theoretical inclusion-exclusion space for the animal. This is equivalent to saying that the essence of biological-animal life can only be properly understood if we remove any hint of subjectivity that could bring the animal close to the existential dimension of the human; likewise, only by excluding all strictly biological-animal elements – what Agamben referred to as “bare life” (*zoe*) – from the ontological dimension of the human will we be able to arrive at an appropriate definition of humanity (Agamben, 1998).⁶

2. Gehlen: the human lacking of *Umwelt*

I now consider Gehlen’s concept of animality as described in his major work from 1940, *Man. His Nature and Place in the World*, generally regarded as a manifesto of philosophical anthropology (D’Anna, 2001; Pansera, 2005). In the all-important introduction to this work, Gehlen strongly defends the thesis that the biological nature of the human is lacking, incomplete and indetermi-

5. On this topic, see Derrida (1989; 2008: 141-160), and Haar (1985: 63-79); for a different point of view, see Krell (1992).

6. I have further developed my insights regarding the Heideggerian philosophy on animality in another paper: Firenze (2017).

nate, because the human is ontologically destined for self-formation. This is because of a key ontological fact: the human has a world, not an environment, and lives not like other animals but according to the mandates of culture.

The animal lives in a particular environment determined according to species, and it is this close link between organism and environment that causes the animal to be biologically and instinctively highly specialized. The human, however, is a biologically non-specialized being, whose instinctual structure is governed by a fundamental organic primitivism. To ensure preservation as a natural being, the humans cannot, like the animals, relate to a particular environment; rather, the humans must generate their own vital dimension by building their own world, thereby developing a “second nature” based on culture (Gehlen, 1988: 29). In other words, unlike the animals inserted in and enveloped by their environment (as if an extension of their body without which they could not live), the humans do not have a rigidly circumscribed environment that fulfils the function of a vital sphere in which each perception corresponds to a predetermined action. Indeed, the relationship of the animals with their environment could be viewed as a non-relationship, given that there is no distance between the organism and its vital sphere – there is, rather, a direct adhesion between the two polarities. Strictly speaking, one could say that the animal is a perfect closed circle of organism-environment, whereas the human represents the unique case of *world-openness*. Hence, the human, as a biologically lacking organism, is destined to gradually develop ontological potential:

For most animals, [...], the environment is an unchanging milieu to which the specialized organ structure of the animal is adapted and within which equally specific, innate, instinctive behaviour is carried out. Specialized organic structure and environment are mutually dependent concepts. (Gehlen, 1988: 27)

As with Heidegger, von Uexküll’s biological theory of *Umwelt* also influenced Gehlen.⁷ As Gehlen himself points out, we are indebted to von Uexküll for having described “the relationship between the structure of an animal’s organs and its environment”. Indeed, the great contribution of von Uexküll’s theory to the formulation of a philosophical anthropological perspective is that it has demonstrated how “each species has its own unique environment which it experiences and masters through its own system of specialized organs” (Gehlen, 1988: 65). Therefore, according to Gehlen, animal *Umwelt* is a closed circuit composed of a series of preestablished perceptual-operational functions that prevent the emergence of the kind of distance between perception and action that is necessary in order to represent objects. This full and perfect concurrence between stimulus and action reflects a fusion between organism and environment that is impossible for the human.

7. Among the texts by von Uexküll cited by Gehlen in this context, we find those works already mentioned concerning the Heideggerian reading, mainly *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* (1909), *Theoretische Biologie* (1921), but also the fundamental work *Streifzüge durch Umwelten und Menschen von Tieren* (1934).

Characterized by – and due to – a lack of biological *Umwelt*, the human is faced with a representational excess that gives rise to a world imbued with meaning. Summing up, animal *Umwelt* and human *Welt* are irreducible to each other, and so, by definition, are mutually exclusive:

Man's 'world', in which the perceivable is clearly not limited to what is necessary for basic survival, may at first seem to be a disadvantage. To say that man is 'world-open' means that he foregoes an animal adaptation to a specific environment. [...] The lack of physical specialization, his vulnerability, as well as his astonishing lack of true instincts together form a coherent whole which is manifested in his 'world-openness' (M. Scheler) or, what amounts to the same thing, in his lack of ties to a specific environment. (Gehlen, 1988: 27)⁸

It is here that Gehlen's anthropocentric theoretical perspective becomes evident: the animal is the ideal analytical object in that it defines the essence of humanity through contrast and through the reciprocal exclusion of ontological properties. Whereas the animal exists in an environmental context because this is biologically predetermined, the biologically indeterminate human exists in a cultural context; whereas the animal has a complete and perfect instinctive structure, the human has poorly developed instincts and, consequently, being incomplete and imperfect, must determine his own vital potential; and whereas the animal is biologically specialized, the human is biologically unspecialized. Basically, one could say that the human represents potential in its purest state, whereas the animal cannot possibly be other than what it is, given its innate biological structure. This is, if you will, a more sophisticated way of reaffirming the classical opposition between human freedom and natural necessity.

Let me now turn the attention to the element that seems to ontologically define human nature, namely, biological lack. The human animal, not being pure instinct like the animal, has certain faculties understood as potentialities that cannot be identified in terms of a number of predefined behaviours, as occurs with the animal. Instinct is, of course, characterized by an operational range that enables the animal to learn and perform different actions suggested by its innate biological structure. However, these possible actions can never go beyond the plane of operations that are predetermined in terms of the animal's vital programming. However, to paraphrase Gehlen, man, as pure potential, is plastic by nature, a *sui generis* animal that never ceases to adapt to reality.

Gehlen supports his anthropological and philosophical perspective with the central theoretical concept of *Entlastung* (relief), which he uses to reflect the perception-action disparity that characterizes the lack of biological being in the human. As Gehlen puts it: "Man's world openness might appear to be a great burden. He is flooded with stimulation, with an abundance of impressions, which he somehow must learn to cope with". For this reason, "relying

8. Scheler's text Gehlen is making reference to is that of the famous 1928 talk titled *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (cf. Scheler, 1961).

on his own means and efforts, man must find relief from the burden of overwhelming stimulation; he must transform his deficiencies into opportunities for survival” (Gehlen, 1988: 28). If, as we have seen, the animal is characterized by a perfect circularity that binds perceptions to actions in a circumscribed environment, the human is characterized by a mismatch between perceptions and actions. The human is exposed, in fact, to an overabundance of perceptions and sensory stimuli which find no immediate response – in its constitutively lacking innate instinctual structure – that would result ipso facto in action. The human – unlike the animal, which is unable to mark any distance between itself and the environment – obtains relief from the proliferation of perceptions and stimuli by neutralizing pressures arising continuously from the world; the human thereby generates a distance from which to select certain perceptions and stimuli over others and so avoids a paralysis of action. In a situation of overabundant perceptions and stimuli and in the absence of perfect perception-action circularity, relief suspends action. But relief also allows action to become independent of the perception; in other words, relief makes a human *action* irreducible to an animal *reaction*.

Inserted in the space created by the distance between perception and action (opened up by relief, understood as a specific human biological principle) are all the essential characteristics of human beings such as language, consciousness, work, technology; in a word, culture. The key question lies in the natural and biological origins of culture, since this seems to Gehlen to be a physical and organic prosthesis that allows the biologically lacking human to find a functional substitute for animal *Umwelt*. Arguably, Gehlen sees relief as natural compensation for the human animal whose biological nature is defined by the lack of a predetermined vital space. Or, put another way, biological indeterminacy is predetermined in the human animal as the ontological impossibility of connecting with an *Umwelt*. We could therefore consider the gap between nature and culture to have a strong biological basis, since culture contains and limits this constitutive biological indeterminacy of the human animal.

The analysis as developed to this point shows how the central terms used by Gehlen to depict the ontological difference between animal and human are the selfsame concepts of *Umwelt* and *Welt*. Accordingly, for Gehlen, man builds *Welt* because he is biologically lacking and does not have animal *Umwelt*. In other words, whereas the environment is the vital enclosed space where the animal relies on its instincts, the world is an open existential space where the human, formed through culture, can “lead his life” – to use Gehlen’s own expression referring to the fact that man, unlike the animal, “does not so much live as lead his life” (Gehlen, 1988: 10). In this sense, by imagining the human as a biologically lacking being (indeterminate by nature) who is essentially determined by praxis, we can finally circumscribe the anthropogenic question. In other words, the human becomes human by denying the dictates of animal nature and by being a *Welt* builder precisely because he is biologically indeterminate, because he lacks *Umwelt*:

‘Unnatural’ culture is the product of a unique being, itself of an ‘unnatural’ construction in comparison to animals. The cultural world exists for man in exactly the same way in which the environment exists for animals. For this reason alone, it is wrong to speak of an environment, in a strictly biological sense, for man. His world-openness is directly related to his unspecialized structure; similarly, his lack of physical means corresponds directly to his self-created ‘second nature’. (Gehlen, 1988: 29)

My own main objection to Gehlen’s perspective is that his placing of *Umwelt* and *Welt* in direct opposition reveals a profound inability to adequately consider the ties that bind the human to the animal, existence to living, and culture to nature. For Gehlen, man finds compensation for a biological lack of *Umwelt* and a defective instinctive-animal constitution (that is, *zoê*) in the technical-cultural artifice. In my opinion, this would imply that the animal-human rupture lies at the very core of what is biological-natural. In fact, when Gehlen describes the natural being of the human as lacking and incomplete, he does so on the basis of an anthropomorphic vision that the human species has reserved to it a biological nature of its own:

In order to survive, [man] must master and re-create nature, and for this reason must *experience* the world. He acts because he is unspecialized and deprived of a natural environment to which he is adapted. The epitome of nature restructured to serve his needs is called *culture* and the culture world is the human world. There are no ‘natural men’ in a strict sense [...]. Culture is therefore the ‘second nature’ – man’s restructured nature, within which he can survive. (Gehlen, 1988: 29)

In this sense, it could be argued that Gehlen’s theoretical framework reproduces the anthropocentric perspective detected above in regard to Heidegger. In my view, in fact, and contrary to what he affirms, Gehlen does not really consider the human in terms of a specific natural biological essence, given that he views a rupture between the human and the animal and between culture and nature occurring directly in the very core of *zoê*.

Metaphysically, to consider that the biological dimension of the human is destined by nature itself to be negated through work and the technical-cultural artifice is, in fact, to imply an inability to consider animal life from an alternative perspective. It is equivalent to excising qualities and properties from an animal *zoê* and projecting them on a human *zoê* – qualities and properties, which, to paraphrase Nietzsche, are “too human”. Strictly speaking, it would be wrong to define the human as a praxic, cultural or historical “animal”, because the biological nature of man, by definition, excludes anything that could be associated with animality.⁹

9. I do not agree with the positive interpretation of Gehlen’s work, as supported by Biuso (2002), Galimberti (1999) or Pansera (2005), among others. According to them, culture is to be identified with the specifically biological-animal nature of the human. On the contrary, as I am trying to show, to Gehlen human culture amounts to humanist and antinatural negation of human animality. On this point, see Marchesini (2002: 15-23).

Thus, to refer to the biological nature of the human species in Gehlenian terms is to perpetuate a profoundly anthropocentric misunderstanding, conditioned by a Promethean-humanist vision. From the outset, there is no real theoretical requirement to consider the animality of the human from an alternative perspective.

The danger is that the image of the animal itself will become so blurred as to fade altogether if we project on it, as an unquestioned theoretical condition, the distorted image of an animal sick from its excess of humanity. The human is indeed sick and biologically “monstrous”, precisely due to a lack of animality; but it is equally true that it is because of this lack that man – incomplete and imperfect, according to Gehlen – can construct himself and, thanks to work and technology (namely, culture), become the “master of nature”. Philosophical anthropology fails to resolve the issue of the biological significance of human life; rather, it muddies the waters to the point of radically anthropomorphizing *zoê*. Gehlen’s theoretical strategy could be viewed as an anthropogenic attempt to split *zoê* by assigning essential attributes removed from the human to the animal and vice versa.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, my reflections on Heidegger and Gehlen revisit certain ontological assumptions that seem to be inadequate in terms of addressing the still unresolved question of the natural-biological basis for human existence. In this regard, Heidegger’s view that the animal is poor-in-world is pointedly significant when confronted with its *apparent* inverse of the biologically lacking human defended by Gehlen. As we have seen, from the Heideggerian point of view, the split between the animal and the human occurs in an ontological space that is external to the biological-natural; in other words, the split lies precisely in the biological-natural/human-existential abyss that ontologically separates *Dasein* from *zoê*. For Heidegger, the animal has *Umwelt* because it lacks *Welt* as a network of meanings related to the unit of meaning “world”; the Gehlenian inverse is that man is capable of shaping *Welt* precisely because he lacks *Umwelt*.

Irrespective of whether this lack is emphasized on one or the other side of the *Umwelt-Welt* bipolarity, both positions reveal themselves to be theoretical strategies aimed at exorcising the animal from the human. Both Heidegger and Gehlen failed to understand the link between humanity and animality, precisely because they failed to consider the link between *Umwelt* and *Welt* in terms of a deeper bond between natural life and human existence – a bond that represents one of the most pressing milestones in contemporary philosophical thinking.

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