

PART 1

Phylogenetics of the Emergence of Humans

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

The Long and Slow Emergence of Humans

1.1. The difficulty of thinking about the beginning of the human being

Before examining how this almost magical animal – other people, like J.F. Dortier (2004), would say “strange” – that is, the human being, I think it is important to intuitively grasp the crux of the problem when we try to define it. Who are we? What are we? Where are we from? It seems that as soon as human groups have been able to transcribe, or retain in memory, their conception of the world, they present an origin of the world and of human beings (Godelier 2010). Science is, by its existence and its ceaseless progress, the tangible proof of the possibility of conceiving the world, and of conceiving it in such a way that it is possible to act in it, without seeking to be in line with common sense. Nevertheless, there is – in fact, but also in principle – a major problem when it comes to conceiving the relationship we have with what we conceive. This problem becomes greater when it comes to thinking about our own genealogy.

The objective reality of the world is a set of data that is accessible to us, despite all the mental constructions invented to make us believe the opposite, but it requires a real intellectual effort which is never completed. Setting aside current philosophical discussions that require a “technicality” that one must have learned to understand its substance, we can grasp what objectivity is by drawing on some examples. How is it possible to send men to the moon, or a robot to Mars, if the tools to do so are not derived from concepts and objective methods? How is it possible to make films, and watch them, if

what we feel is not accessing reality? I remember ancient discussions with African elders who questioned Western knowledge, blaming it for being what we would translate today as “ethnocentric”. Yet they concluded: “There is, despite everything, something true in your knowledge, for an airplane, for example, which can carry hundreds of people in the air, over thousands of kilometres, is proof beyond doubt. But is that so important?” Their wish was that their people could acquire the “objective” knowledge they did not have, while retaining the knowledge they had and that we no longer possess. This is another story that we will not go into here.

What is this “magic” that is unique to humans? It’s the fact that only the human knows how to make planes and rockets, and send animals, plants and humans into space. In fact, it all started a long time ago with the production of stone tools. An effort to abstract and question our “natural” thinking about things is necessary, along with a minimum of uncontrollable intuition to try to access this slow and long process that eventually led to the emergence of humans.

Since the emergence that makes us human and being human, we are – and I say “we” thinking of the collective of all humans, since the human emerged, between 300,000 years ago and 50,000 years ago, to which I am aware of belonging – beings conscious of the world: that is, conscious both of the exteriority of the world in which we are and to which we belong, and conscious of our presence in this world, as part of this world; we are a question for ourselves. We are a mobile consciousness, albeit unstable, capable of reflecting on ourselves, capable of projecting ourselves on the world and on others, but also capable of being moved by the encounter with the other who shows us that he too is conscious of himself, projective consciousness, mobile consciousness, conscious of himself and of the other. We are. We are there. But what are we? And how did we appear? As Heidegger (1958) would say, what is this being whose being is such that the question of being has a meaning for itself? Or again, like Sartre (1943), what is this being for which the question of being is in its being involved with another being other than himself? Everyone perceives themselves being; perceives themselves being there; and yet elsewhere, from this elsewhere that allows him to say himself; to say he is there, in the being. Each individual knows himself to be a whole, but a whole that knows that he is not the whole at all, because aside from his whole, there is not nothing; he lives it unceasingly.

I have used the “we” here to indicate that when thinking of individual consciousness, the use of “I”, separate from the original relationship that allowed it to appear, takes away its being. The relationship, as Gilbert Simondon (2020, pp. 24–27) showed, has a “rank of being”. More precisely, as Paul-Antoine Miquel’s (2015) analysis demonstrated, it is first in relation to the being (i.e. nature) of the being (i.e. individual) that emerges in relation. The “I” does not appear from nothingness; it is an “awareness”, that is, consciousness is what takes and is taken at the time; self-awareness is and is not the same “thing” as the conscious self whose totality the self-awareness believes it takes. “I am conscious of myself” is a displacement of the self in relation to the self which shows, in fact, that when we speak of consciousness, we find ourselves in a world where the principle of the excluded third party no longer works. There is no A or non-A (“conscious of” or “not conscious of”); there can also be A and non-A; and even neither A nor non-A; because the whole of A and non-A is not everything... Within this framework, any logical analysis of the discourse will show a contradiction. This contradiction, which is real, makes the being of the conscious “I” an ambiguous being, at least for the classical logician. Insofar as consciousness is not understood as a process, nor is it possible to reduce it by pure logic, logical analysis cannot grasp it.

The “fact of consciousness” is a logical paradox; we must concede that everything that concerns it is marked by the logic of the “third party included”. There is no way out of it, except to look for the reference of what is considered external to consciousness within itself, which is contradictory. An objectification approach refers the object under study in terms of what it is related to, outside the conscience; but this external reference can be internalized within the consciousness, while having been produced outside it. The filmmaker, who captures a scene, can be filmed, while the second filmmaker filming the scene is the one that says the meaning of the film, but whose value is doubled, repositioned, by the one who shows its construction. We could imagine a third filmmaker who would himself be in the first scene and would show in places that it is indeed a scene already observed by the other two, from outside the scene.

If the plane or spacecraft is the indicator of the objective efficiency provided by the scientific and technical approach, we could say that cinema is the indicator of subjective efficiency. As we can see in this last example, tools are needed to create this separation between the observing subject and

the observed object, whether this tool is simply a mediator or a third-party mediator that produces a new median space between the object, the first tool, and the user of the latter. The use of tools makes us aware that consciousness is a paradox; it is both a tool and a user of tools, because in essence it is a “being of relation”. What is significant is that the more recent the tools are, the more they speak to us about what makes us human. We will come back to this aspect after our long journey in the past.

This paradox of being conscious was experienced by humans at that distant time when they were fully developed. They have encountered a world of consciousness that cannot be understood only by a simple logic excluding the third party: the consciousness of the world, of other conscious people and of oneself, the one that allows access to knowledge and belief, that makes one wise or “crazy”, or both at the same time. The first human groups that reached this consciousness of self and others, in a dangerous natural world where the refusal of the excluded third party leads to certain death (is there or is there not a lion; is there or is there not danger; the third party must be excluded!) must have lived it as a terrifying, magical and marvellous experience. It seems that the oldest religions can be called animist (Godelier 2010). Indeed, appearing in the natural world in which human objects remained a minority, this relational consciousness, if it could be said to be between humans, should lead to the belief that every living being, and therefore every being identified with a living being, should also have a similar consciousness. We have learned so much to separate thought from the body that it does not occur to us that we feel more than we think. In ancient times, everyone knew this intuitively, even if they had difficulty saying it. It is probable that in the first moments of self awareness, humans realized that they were not acting in consciousness, but in participation, in perception. Self-awareness came later. This is still the case, but who is aware of it today where self-affirmation is sanctified?

What seems more and more likely is that this “awareness” took place in stages, over a longer period than we think. Could it be the development of technical and then scientific thought and of “established” religions that put it aside? We are at a time of scientific and technical progress (see the above example of cinema, to which the techniques of the virtual are added) such that this problem is resurfacing and can no longer be shrugged off.

1.2. The current challenge of human construction

Without being under any illusion about our ability to explain, in its strongest sense, how this emergence was possible, is there a way to understand it and to track its appearance in the scientific descriptions of the developments that took place over the course of about seven million years? From the ancient great ape, which is our shared ancestor with the chimpanzee and the bonobo, how have the populations that gradually allowed this new form of life, the one we call human, to evolve? Is this new form strictly speaking unheard of because it is based on the possibility of a kind of endless transformation?

Over the past 50,000 years, populations from this “human form” have spread across the globe, multiplying in numbers unimaginable for an animal species of this weight. Today, the human species weighs 350 million tons directly, more than double if we add domesticated animals. We have to multiply that by more than six if we count domesticated plants. Although this represents little more than 0.2% of the total mass of living beings, including microorganisms, which take up half of it in terms of flow, humanity takes up more than a quarter of the primary biological production of the continents, which comes from the photosynthesis activity of plants (Krausmann *et al.* 2013). The inanimate material aspect, that is the minerals and fossilised materials of all kinds that humans exploit, leads to a tenfold increase in the masses involved. Which species takes up so much space?

About 50,000 to 60,000 years after the emergence of “modern” humans, an extremely short time on the Earth’s timescale, or even of life on Earth, the human population has taken a unique place in the history of living things. On the basis of a historical analysis, we can claim that the “anthropocene event”, this novelty that shakes us, comes first and foremost from the West, and especially from the English-speaking world, or even from capitalism, and that it is very recent (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017). This is where we confuse how it came about and the overall long-term consequence. Certainly, this “humanity” is not homogeneous. Certainly, some people “weigh” per individual ten times more than others; the fact remains that the trend is a global drive. The West no longer accounts for the majority of the global drain, and its share is declining every year. According to this historical logic, we could say that the beginning of human groups is in Africa, a contingent, specific and local event; it is therefore Africans, from the very

beginning, who are “guilty” of the current deregulation, and even just a small population somewhere in Africa... But today, humanity is on every continent, and the pressure of its burden, albeit very unequal, is visible on every continent and in the sea. So, it is not the way a process, an activity, a value is set up that defines the importance of the event. Or again, the reasons for the appearance of a phenomenon do not in any way prejudge its importance in the long term. This is in accordance with the concept of exaptation, which we will discuss later, and which Nietzsche, the inventor of genealogical analysis, had already stressed many times.

Today, understanding the human being is becoming a crucial issue, both intellectually and practically. We cannot be content with saying that human cognition is unequalled (it still has some very archaic aspects) nor with thinking about the human being in this space recently named Gaia – which both understands the human being, interacts with him or her and becomes a condition for the continuation of this experience – as unique since the advent of the first living being. What is the relationship between humans and their environment?