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Rules for the Human Zoo: a response to the *Letter on Humanism*

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From *Nicht gerettet: Versuche nach Heidegger* (Suhrkamp, 2001) pp 302 – 333;
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Abstract. ***Rules for the Human Zoo*, also known as the *Elmauer Rede*, originally appeared in 1999 in the newspaper *Die Zeit* and was subsequently published by Suhrkamp in 2001. In this response to Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, Sloterdijk poses the basic question about the purpose of politics, governance, and civic solidarity. On the one hand, since Plato, politics has been conceived in part as concerned with the necessity of 'taming' humans into being good citizens. Sloterdijk thus follows Nietzsche and Heidegger in portraying humanism as one side in a "constant battle ... between bestializing and taming tendencies". It is in the Hobbesian state of nature that humans are 'wolves' to each other; but who turns the wolves into friendly, loyal dogs? Humanism has claimed, according to Sloterdijk, that it is "reading the right books" which "calms the inner beast". It is the great books, the "thick letters" from one great thinker to another, that provide the "model presented by the wise", which enables "the care of man by man". At the present, Sloterdijk argues, we appear to have been abandoned by the wise. It is no longer the humanist but the archivist who bothers to look up the old, thick letters. Humanism thus gives way to archivism.**

Books, as the poet Jean Paul once remarked, are thick letters to friends. With this phrase, he aptly articulated the quintessential nature and function of humanism: It is telecommunication in the medium of print to underwrite friendship. That which has been known since the days of Cicero as *humanism* is in the narrowest and widest senses a consequence of literacy. Ever since philosophy began as a literary genre, it has recruited adherents by writing in an infectious way about love and friendship. Not only is it about love of wisdom: it is also an attempt to move others to this love. That written philosophy has managed from its beginning more than 2500 years ago until the present day to remain communicable is a result of its capacity to make friends through its texts. It has been reinscribed like a chain letter through the generations, and despite all the errors of reproduction—indeed, perhaps because of such errors—it has recruited its copyists and interpreters into the ranks of brotherhood.

The most important link in this chain of transmission was without doubt the reception of the Greek message by the Romans, for the Roman adoption of the Greek texts made them available to the empire and mediated, through the fall of the Roman west, their accessibility to later European cultures. Certainly, the Greek authors must have wondered what kind of friends would one day present themselves in response to their letters. It is one of the rules of the game of literate culture that the senders cannot know their eventual recipients in advance. Nonetheless, the authors committed themselves to the adventure of sending off their letters to unidentified friends. Without the transcription of Greek philosophy in transportable form, the messages we know as tradition could never have been sent; but, without the Greek tutors who placed themselves at the disposal of the Romans to help with the deciphering of the letters from Greece, the Romans would never have managed to make friends with the senders of the texts. Friendship at a distance required both: the letters and their deliverymen or interpreters. On the other hand, without the willingness of the Roman readers to be seduced by the missives of the Greeks, there would have been no recipients:

and, had the Romans with their extraordinary receptivity not come into play, the Greek message would never have reached western Europe, which retains to this day an interest in humanism. There would be neither the phenomenon of humanism, nor any form of Latin philosophy worth taking seriously, much less any vernacular national philosophical culture. When today we speak in the German language of humanistic concerns, it is possible not least of all because of the willingness of the Romans to read the writings of Greek teachers as though they were letters to friends in Italy.

If one considers the epochal results of the Greco-Roman mail, it becomes evident that it has a particular relationship to the writing, sending, and receipt of philosophical writings. Apparently, the writer of this type of love letter sends his work out into the world without knowing the recipient—or, even if he knows him, he is conscious that the transmission transcends him and might provoke an unknown number of chances of friendship with nameless, perhaps even yet unborn, readers. Erotically seen, the hypothetical friendship of the writer of books and letters with the recipients of his messages represents a case of love at a distance—and this entirely in the sense of Nietzsche, who knew that writing is the power to transmit love not only to one's nearest and dearest, but also, through the next person encountered, into the unknown, distant, future life. Writing not only creates a telecommunicative bridge between known friends, who at the time of the transmission live in a geographical proximity to one another; but it sets in motion an unpredictable process. It shoots an arrow in the air, described in the words of old European alchemists as an *actio in distans*, with the objective of revealing an unknown friend and enticing him into the circle of friends. In fact, the reader who sits down to a thick book can approach it as an invitation to a gathering; and should he be moved by the contents, he thereby enters the circle of the Called, making himself available to receive the message.

Thus we can trace the communitarian fantasy that lies at the root of all humanism back to the model of a literary society, in which participation through reading the canon reveals a common love of inspiring messages. At the heart of humanism so understood we discover a cult or club fantasy: the dream of the portentous solidarity of those who have been chosen to be allowed to read. In the ancient world—indeed, until the dawn of the modern nation-states—the power of reading actually did mean something like membership of a secret elite; linguistic knowledge once counted in many places as the provenance of sorcery. In Middle English the word 'glamour' developed out of the word 'grammar'.[1] The person who could read would be thought easily capable of other impossibilities. The humanists are initially no more than the cult of the literate: and in this, as in other sects, expansionist and universalist projects appeared. Where the literate were imaginative and unsophisticated, grammatical or literary mysticism arose, such as the Kabala, which purported to attain insight into the Book of Creation.[2] Where, on the other hand, humanism was pragmatic and programmatic, as in the gymnasium ideology of the bourgeois nation-state of the 19th and 20th centuries, the pattern of the literary society became the norm of political society. From then on people organized themselves as literary groups drawn together only by their common reading, which eventually developed into a literary canon into which one was initiated: a canon associated with national boundaries. In addition to the classical authors common to all of Europe, authors of national and modern

[1] The expression for magic comes from the word for grammar.

[2] It is the great insight of the Golem legend that the secret of life is intimately connected with the phenomenon of writing (see Idel, 1990). In the forward to Sloterdijk (2001), Henri Allan (2001) refers to a paper by the United States President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1982), whose editor refers to the Golem legend.

classics were mobilized, whose letters to the public were turned, through booksellers and higher education, into effective forces for nation building. What are modern nations except the effective fictions of literate publics, who have become a like-minded collective of friends through reading the same books? Universal obligatory military service for young men and the universal obligation to read the classics for young people of both genders were characteristic of the classical bourgeois state, recalling a period of armed and literate humanity on which the new and old conservatives of today look back, simultaneously helpless and nostalgic and completely unable to provide a media theoretical justification for the importance of a literary canon. (If one wants to see how that is currently playing out, consider how deplorable the results were of a recently attempted national debate in Germany over the supposed necessity of establishing a new literary canon.)

In fact, it was from 1789 to 1945 that reading-friendly national humanism had its greatest period of influence. At its center, powerful and self-satisfied, resided the caste of classical and modern philologists, who were entrusted with the task of initiating each new generation into the circle of recipients of the authorized standard thick letters. The power of the professor in this period, and the key role of the philologists, had its root in their privileged knowledge of the authors who were considered senders of the letters that undergirded solidarity. As far as its content went, national humanism was nothing other than the power to incline the young toward the classics and to reaffirm the universal validity of the national canon.[3] Thus the nation-state itself was to some extent a literary and postal product: the fiction of a fateful friendship with distant peoples and sympathetically united readers of bewitching common (or individual) authors.

If this period seems today to have irredeemably vanished, it is not because people have through decadence become unwilling to follow their national literary curriculum. The epoch of nationalistic humanism has come to an end because the art of writing love-inspiring letters to a nation of friends, however professionally it is practised, is no longer sufficient to form a telecommunicative bond between members of a modern mass society. Because of the formation of mass culture through the media—radio in the First World War and television after 1945, and even more through the contemporary web revolution—the coexistence of people in the present societies has been established on new foundations. These are, as it can uncontrovertibly be shown, clearly post-literary, postepistolary, and thus posthumanistic. Anyone who thinks the prefix 'post' in this formulation is too dramatic can replace it with the adverb 'marginal'. Thus our thesis: modern societies can produce their political and cultural synthesis only marginally through literary, letter-writing, humanistic media. Of course, that does not mean that literature has come to an end, but it has split itself off and become a sui generis subculture, and the days of its value as bearer of the national spirit have passed. The social synthesis is no longer—and is no longer seen to be—primarily a matter of books and letters. New means of political–cultural telecommunication have come into prominence, which have restricted the pattern of script-born friendship to a limited number of people. The period when modern humanism was the model for schooling and education has passed, because it is no longer possible to retain the illusion that political and economic structures could be organized on the amiable model of literary societies.

This disillusionment, appearing after World War I in the awareness of people who themselves had had a humanistic education, has a particularly convoluted history, marked by twists and turns. For, exactly at the cruel end of the era of national

[3] And it was also the power to reaffirm the national validity of the universal canon.

humanism, in the unparalleled gloom of the years after 1945, the humanistic model experienced a last efflorescence. There was an artificially promoted and reflexive renaissance that has provided the model for later reanimations of humanism. If the background were not so dark, one would be tempted to speak of a madness, of a competition in self-deception. In the fundamentalism of the years after 1945, understandably, perhaps many people found themselves unable to go from the horrors of war into a society that represented itself once again as a peaceful collection of book-friends—as though the Goethe-Jugend could eradicate the memory of the Hitler-Jugend. At that time, it seemed to many to be possible to reestablish in conjunction with the newly revived Latin classics a second, biblical, base for European culture, thus grounding that culture, once again being described as 'occidental', in Christian humanism. This confused neohumanism, looking through Weimar towards Rome, was a dream of the salvation of the European soul through a radicalized bibliophilia, a determinedly hopeful infatuation with the civilizing, the humanizing, power of classical reading—an attempt, if we can take the liberty of so describing it, to conjoin Cicero and Christ as coeval classics.

In this postwar humanism, however illusory it might have been, a motive is revealed, without which the humanistic tendency in general cannot be understood, whether in the days of the Romans or in the age of the modem bourgeois nation-state. Humanism as a word and as a movement always has a goal, a purpose, a rationale: it is the commitment to save men from barbarism. It is clear that exactly those times which have experienced the barbarizing potential that is released in power struggles between peoples are the times in which the demand for humanism is loudest and most strident. Anyone who is asking today about the future of humanity and about the methods of humanization wants to know if there is any hope of mastering the contemporary tendency towards the bestialization of humanity. It is disturbing that bestialization, now as ever, tends to accompany displays of great power: whether as open warfare or raw imperial power, or in the daily degradation of human beings in entertainments offered in the media. The Romans influenced Europe by providing archetypes for both—on the one hand, their overweening militarism; on the other, their precedent-setting entertainment industry of bloody games. The latent message of humanism, then, is the taming of men. And its hidden thesis is: reading the right books calms the inner beast.

The phenomenon of humanism deserves attention today primarily because it reminds us (however indirectly and embarrassingly) that human beings in high culture are constantly subjected simultaneously to two pressures, which we will here for simplicity's sake term the 'constraining' and the 'unconstraining', or 'disinhibiting'. It is part of the credo of humanism that human beings are 'creatures capable of suggestion', and that it is therefore extremely important to expose them to the right kinds of influences. The label of humanism reminds us (with apparent innocuousness) of the constant battle for humanity that reveals itself as a contest between bestializing and taming tendencies.

In the age of Cicero the two influences were easy to identify, for each of them had their characteristic medium. For the bestializing, the Romans, in their amphitheaters, their animal-baiting, their battles to the death, and their public hangings, had established the most efficient mass-media net in antiquity. In the raging stadiums of the Mediterranean the unconstrained *homo inhumanus* came into his own in a way seen never before and only seldom afterwards.[4] During the time of the Caesars the provision of the

[4] The comparable ascension of modern mass culture to the heights of bestiality-consumerism was attained in the genre of *Chain Saw Massacre* movies (see Edmundson, 1997).

Roman masses with bestializing spectacles became an unavoidable, routinely executed technique of control that, thanks to Juvenal's bread-and-circuses description, is remembered even today. Ancient humanism can be understood only when it is grasped as one opponent in a media contest: that is, as the resistance of the books against the amphitheater, and the opposition of the humanizing, patient-making, sensitizing philosophical reading against the dehumanizing, impatient, unrestrained, sensation-mongering and excitement-mongering of the stadium. What the educated Romans called *humanitas* would have been unthinkable without the need to abstain from the mass culture of the theaters of cruelty. Should the humanist himself occasionally stray into the roaring crowd it is only to assure himself that he is also a human being and can thus be infected by bestialization. He returns from the theater to his house, shamed by his involuntary participation in the contagious sensations, and can now claim that nothing human is foreign to him. But, thereby, it is affirmed that humanity itself consists in choosing to develop one's nature through the media of taming, and to forswear bestialization. The meaning of this choice of media is to wean oneself from one's own bestiality and to establish a distance between yourself and the dehumanizing escalation of the roaring mob in the arena.

So it becomes clear: The question of humanism is more than the bucolic assumption that reading improves us. It is, rather, no less than an issue of anthropodicy: that is, a characterization of man with respect to his biological indeterminacy and his moral ambivalence. Above all, however, from now on the question of how a person can become a true or real human being becomes unavoidably a media question, if we understand by media the means of communion and communication by which human beings attain to that which they can and will become.

In the fall of 1946—in the darkest valley of the European postwar crisis—the philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote his now famous *Letter on Humanism* (1977 ([1946])—a text that at first glance could also be understood as a thick letter to friends. But the attempt at friendship that this letter marshaled was no longer simply that of bourgeois openhanded communication, and the concept of friendship that was invoked through this demanding philosophical missive was no longer that of a communication between a national public and its classicist. Heidegger knew, as he formulated this letter, that he had to speak with a bellow and write with an angry hand, and that a preestablished harmony between the author and his readers could in no respect still be treated as a given. At this point in time he did not know if he had friends; and, even if he did, their friendship needed to be established anew, on a different basis from everything that had previously counted as grounds for friendship within the nation and within Europe. In any case, one thing is clear: what the philosopher in the fall of the year 1946 put to paper was not a lecture on the nation or on any extant Europe: it was a complicated, simultaneously careful and clever, attempt of an author (seldom attempted by a person of Heidegger's provincial inclinations) to introduce his message to a positively inclined recipient—a foreigner, a potential friend at a distance, a young thinker who had taken the liberty of allowing himself to be ensorcelled by a German philosopher during the German occupation of France.

So: a new method of making friends? Another venture towards eliciting the like-minded and similarly inclined through a randomly sent essay? Another method of humanization? Another social agreement among bearers of a less provincial, no longer nationalistic, humanism? Of course, Heidegger's enemies have not hesitated to suggest that the sly little man from Messkirch instinctively seized the first opportunity to rehabilitate his reputation. He cunningly utilized the approach of one of his French admirers to transform his political ambiguity into high mystical insight. This suspicion might seem suggestive and plausible; but it underestimates the conceptual and strategic

event that the *Letter on Humanism*—first sent to Jean Beaufret in Paris, and later translated and published as an essay—represented. For, in this essay, which he chose to present as a letter, Heidegger analyzed and criticized the characteristics of European humanism; and, in so doing, he opened up a transhumanistic or posthumanistic space for thought, one in which a considerable portion of the philosophical consideration on man has taken place ever since.(5)

From the letter of Jean Beaufret, Heidegger took as his focus one phrase: how can a sense be restored to the word 'humanism'? The letter to the young Frenchman gently reproves the questioner, as is seen most clearly in a challenge repeated twice:

> "This question proceeds from your intention to retain the word 'humanism'. I wonder whether that is necessary. Or is the damage caused by all such terms still not sufficiently obvious?" (1977, page 195).

> "Your question not only presupposes a desire to retain the word 'humanism', but also contains an admission that this word has lost its sense" (page 224).

This reveals part of Heidegger's strategy: the word 'humanism' must be abandoned if the real task of thinking, which has shown itself to have been exhausted in the humanistic or metaphysical tradition, is to be furthered in its original unity and irresistibility. To put the point sharply: Why should humanism and its general philosophical self-representation be seen as the solution for humanity, when the catastrophe of the present clearly shows that it is man himself, along with his systems of metaphysical self-improvement and self-clarification, that is the problem? This turning of the question back on Beaufret is not entirely without pedagogical cruelty, for it reveals to the student the false answer contained within the question. But it is also seriously meant, for the three contemporary remedies for the European maladies of 1945—Christianity, Marxism, and existentialism, which differed from one another only in their superficial characteristics—were characterized as parallel varieties of humanism: or, more explicitly, as three ways and means of evading the last radicalization of the question about the essence of man.

Heidegger offered to prepare the way for an end to the most radical omission of European thought—namely, the refusal to pose the question of the Being of Man in the only appropriate (that is, the existential–ontological) way. Or at least the author indicated his readiness to serve in whatever future situations might develop from the asking of the question when properly posed. With this apparently modest twist, Heidegger opened the possibility of cataclysmic consequences: Humanism, in its ancient, in its Christian, as in its Enlightenment form, was revealed as the agent of a 2000-year denial. It was accused of having prevented, through its swiftly provided, apparently self-evident, and irrefutable characterization of the nature of man, the development of a more appropriate way to pose the question about the nature of man. Heidegger explained that his work after *Sein und Zeit* [1927] was directed against humanism, not because it overvalued humanity, but because it did not value humanity highly enough (1977, page 210). But what would it mean to value the essence of man highly enough? It would require first to renounce a habitual false denigration. The question of the Being of Man will never be posed properly until we can distance ourselves from the oldest, most enduring, and traditional product of European metaphysics: the definition of man as *rational animal.* According to this definition, man is characterized as an animal enriched by a spiritual supplement. Heidegger's existential–ontological analysis rejects this understanding of man, since for him the

(5) This master stroke is misunderstood by those who see in Heidegger's onto-anthropology something like an antihumanism, a tortured formulation that suggests something like a metaphysical form of misanthropy.

nature of man can never be expressed from a zoological or biological perspective, even when a spiritual or transcendental component is consistently added.

On this point Heidegger is completely adamant; indeed, he strides like an angry angel with crossed swords between beast and man, in order to deny any ontological commonality between the two. In his antivitalistic and antibiological passion he allows himself almost hysterical statements, as when he explains that it seems "as if we are nearer to the nature of the divine than to the alien-ness of the animals" (1977, page 206). At the heart of this antivitalistic passion lay the recognition that man is differentiated from animals in ontology, not in species or genus, so he cannot under any circumstances be considered an animal with a cultural or metaphysical addition. On the contrary: the form of being of the human itself is different from all vegetable and animal beings, because man has a world and is in the world, while plants and animals inhabit only a transitory environment.

If there is any philosophical reason for an essay on the value of the human, it is because man is called by Being, and, as Heidegger in his pastoral mode liked to say, is constituted so as to be the House of Being. That is why human beings have language; but they possess it, according to Heidegger, not for their own sake, but only so that they can understand each other and through this mutual understanding civilize each other.

> "Rather, language is the House of Being, in which man ek-sists by dwelling, in that he belongs to the truth of Being, guarding it.
>
> So the point is that in the determination of the humanity of man as ek-sistence what is essential is not man but Being—as the dimension of the *ecstasis* of ek-sistence" (1977, page 213).

If we puzzle over this initially hermetic formulation we begin to understand why Heidegger was so certain that his criticism of humanism would not eventuate in an inhumanism. For insofar as he rejects the claim of humanism to have adequately defined the humanity of man, and opposes to it his own onto-anthropology, he nonetheless indirectly retains the most important function of classical humanism—namely, the befriending of man through the word of the other—indeed, he radicalizes this drive to befriend, and transfers it from mere pedagogy to the center of ontological consciousness.

That is the meaning of the often cited and much ridiculed description of man as the shepherd of being. By using images of the pastoral and idyllic, Heidegger speaks of the task of man, which is his being, and the nature of man from which his role springs, which is to shepherd being and to speak being. Certainly, man does not look toward being the way the ill man looks toward his bed but, rather as a shepherd looks after his herd in the fields, with the important difference that here, instead of a herd of sheep, it is the world as an open circumstance that is to be looked after. Furthermore, this task of oversight is not represented by Heidegger as one freely chosen in man's own interest; rather, men were set apart by Being itself as its shepherd. The place where this happens is the Clearing, die Lichtung, where Being appears as that which is there.

What gave Heidegger the certainty that he had by this turnabout transcended and surpassed humanism is the fact that, by understanding man as a clearing for Being, he involved him in taming and befriending much more deeply than could any humanistic debestializing, or any love for texts that speak of love. By describing man as the shepherd and neighbor of Being and calling language the House of Being, he bound man into a relationship with Being that imposed radical constraints on his behavior. It contained him, the shepherd, within the house or in its neighborhood. Heidegger suggested a self-understanding that demanded of man more inactivity and receptivity than any comprehensive program of education had ever attempted. Man was subjugated

to an ecstatic behavior that reached much further than the civil constraints of the text-pious readers of the classical word. Heideggerian self-contained dwelling in the house of language is characterized as a receptive listening to whatever it is that will be said by Being. It requires a proximate listening, for which man must become more passive, and tamer, than the humanist reading the classics. Heidegger wishes man to be more submissive than a mere good reader would be. He wishes to found a way of making friends in which he himself would no longer be seen only as a classicist or one author among others. It would be best if the public (consisting, naturally, of clueless inferiors) would recognize that Being itself had begun once again to speak, through him, the tutor of the question of Being.

By this move, Heidegger elevated Being to the sole author of all important letters, and placed himself as their current scribe. Whoever speaks from such a position is allowed to call attention to stammers, and to publicize silence. Being thus sends the most important letters. More precisely, it addresses them to spiritually advanced friends, to receptive neighbors, to groups of silent herdsmen. But, so far as we can see, no nations, not even alternative schools, can be derived from this circle of fellow shepherds and friends of Being—not least because there can be no public canon of manifestations of Being. So, until further notice, Heidegger's collected work stands as the measure and voice of the nameless Ur-author.

This dark communication reveals no way in which a society can be constructed out of neighbors of Being. Until something further develops, we must understand it as an invisible congregation, a church of scattered singletons, each in his own way listening to the unknown and awaiting the word in which will be expressed whatever the Speaker reveals about language itself.[6] It is pointless to expand here upon the crypto-catholic character of the Heideggerian objects of veneration. What is clear is that Heidegger's critique of humanism suggests an attitude which directs men toward an asceticism that goes far deeper than that achievable through any humanistic education. It is only through the power of this asceticism that a society of knowers beyond the humanistic literary society could form. It would be a society of men who no longer placed humans at the center, because they had realized that men exist only as neighbors of Being, and not as independent homeowners or as tenants in landlordless apartments. Humanism cannot contribute anything to this ascetic ideal as long as it remains fixated on the image of strong men.

The humanistic friends of human authors lack the blessed grace that Being shows to those who have been touched and spoken to by it. For Heidegger there is no path from humanism to this acute ontological exercise in humility. He sees it rather as a contribution to the history of the disarmament of subjectivity. Actually, Heidegger interprets the historical world of Europe as the theater of militant humanism; it is the battlefield on which human subjectivity, with portentous consequences, has acted out its domination over Being. From this perspective, humanism is seen as the natural accomplice of all possible tortures which could be inflicted in the name of human well-being. In the tragic battle of the titans of the mid-century, between bolshevism, fascism, and Americanism, Heidegger saw only three varieties of the same anthropocentric power, three candidates for a humanistically camoflagued form of world domination (see Vietta, 1989). Fascism excluded itself from this competition by revealing that it despised the constraining values of peace and education more than its opponents did. Fascism is actually a metaphysics of disinhibiting—maybe also a form of disinhibiting of metaphysics. In Heidegger's view, fascism was a synthesis

[6] Actually, it is equally difficult to imagine what a society composed only of deconstructionists would look like, or one constituted only of Levinas students, who would constantly yield to the suffering Other.

of humanism and bestiality—that is, the paradoxical coincidence of restraint and license.

In the face of such weird criticisms and twists, it was very natural to re-pose the question of the basis for the taming and education of man. If today Heidegger's ontological shepherds' game—which even in its own day sounded odd and jarring—seems totally anachronistic, it nonetheless serves to have articulated in all its painfulness and leftist tendencies the question of the age: What can tame man, when the role of humanism as the school for humanity has collapsed? What can tame men, when their previous attempts at self-taming have led primarily to power struggles? What can tame men, when, after all previous experiments to grow the species up, it remains unclear what it is to be a grown-up? Or is it simply no longer possible to pose the question of the constraint and formation of mankind by theories of civilizing and upbringing?

We shall avoid following Heidegger's instructions that we stand transfixed at the endpoints of conscious thought. We shall try instead to characterize historically more precisely the ecstatic clearing in which man allows himself to be bespoken by Being. It will become clear that the human sojourn in the Clearing of being is not an ontological primitive, which allows no further exploration; there is a history, resolutely ignored by Heidegger, of the entrance into the Clearing of being—a social history of the openness of man to the *Seinsfrage*, and a historical progression in the clarification of ontological difference.

So, on the one hand, we must examine the natural history of *Gelassenheit* (letting be, releasement), by virtue of which man becomes capable of worlds; and, on the other hand, recount the social history of taming, through which man became the being who could pull himself together in order to speak the totality of Being.[7] The true story of the Clearing (from which a deeper, humanism-transcending understanding of man must take its beginning) incorporates these two larger stories, which converge in a single common perspective: namely, in the account of how the thinking animal became the thinking man. The first of these two stories gives an account of the adventure of humanization. It tells how, in the long period of prehuman development, a type of creature born immature developed out of the species of live-born mammalian humans. These, to speak paradoxically, entered their world with an ever-increasing excess of animalian unpreparedness. This led to an anthropogenetic revolution—the transformation of biological birth into the act of coming into the world. Because of his obstinate suspicion of anthropology, and in his desire to maintain the ontological purity of the beginning of *Dasein* and being-in-the-world, Heidegger did not take sufficient account of this explosion. For the fact that man is a creature that could become a being in the world is rooted in the characteristics of his species that reveal themselves in the basic ideas of premature-born-ness, neoteny, and the chronic animalian immaturity of man.[8] We could even go so far as to suggest that man is the being in which being an animal is separate from remaining an animal. Because of his shattered animality, the indeterminate being falls out of the environment and manages to develop a world in an ontological sense. Man was destined from the cradle for this ek-static coming-into-the-world and orientation toward Being, the legacy of his evolutionary history. If man is in the world it is because he belongs to a movement that brought him to the world and set him in it. He is the product of a super-birth that created from a nursling a worldling.

[7] On the motivation of 'gathering' see Schneider (1999, pages 44f).

[8] See the chapter "Domestication of Being. On the Elucidation of the Clearing", especially section 3, "The lightening thinking", pages 167–211, in Sloterdijk (2001).

Such an exodus would create only psychotic animals were it not that concurrent with the entrance into the World there is also an entrance from that world into what Heidegger terms the 'House of Being'. The traditional languages of man made the ecstasy of Being-in-the-World endurable in that they showed man how his being in the world could also be experienced as being-alongside-oneself. Insofar as the *Lichtung* is an event on the border between natural and cultural histories, human coming to the world takes the form of a coming to language.[9]

But the history of the Clearing cannot be developed only as a tale of man moving into the houses of language. For, as soon as speaking men gather into larger groups and not only connect themselves to linguistic houses but also build physical houses, they enter the arena of domestication. They are now not only sheltered by their language, but also tamed by their accommodations. In the Clearing, as its most obvious marks, appear the houses of men (as well as the temples of their gods and the palaces of their masters). Historians of culture have made it clear that with domesticity the relationship between men and animals changed. With the taming of men by their houses the age of pets began as well. Their attachment to houses is not only a question of civilizing, but also a matter of direction and upbringing.

Men and pets—the history of this weird cohabitation has not yet been properly told, and philosophers up to the present day have not properly recognized what they need to find in this history [one of the few exceptions is de Fontenay (1998) as well as Macho (1997a; 1997b)]. Only in a few places is the veil of philosophical silence about man, the house, and animals as a biopolitical unity lifted. What one would hear on the other side of that veil would be a whirlwind of references to problems that are so far too difficult for men. Among them, not the least difficult, is the close connection between domesticity and theory building, for one could go so far as to consider theory building as one variety of home work, or even better as a type of home leisure; for according to the ancient understanding of theory, it was like looking out of the window: essentially a form of contemplation. It is only in recent times, since knowledge began to be understood as a form of power, that it became more clearly a form of work. In this sense, the windows of the Clearing were walls, behind which men became beings capable of theory. Taking strolls, in which movement and contemplation unite, derives as well from domesticity. Even Heidegger's contemplative wandering through fields and woods is a typical form of movement for someone who has a house to fall back on.

But these forays into the Clearing out of the safety of the house are only the harmless face of man's householding. The Clearing is at the same time a battleground and a place of decision and choice. And in these respects it is not possible to see only the philosophical pastoral. Where there are houses, there are also decisions about who shall live in them. In fact, and through this fact, it is determined what type of community dwellers will be dominant. In the Clearing, it is revealed which enterprises are worth fighting for, as soon as men emerge as beings who form societies and erect social hierarchies. That master of dangerous thinking, Nietzsche, told us what it was really all about when in the third part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2006), in the section titled "On the virtue that makes small", he wrote:

> "For he [Zarathustra] wanted to learn what had transpired in the meantime among human beings; whether they had become bigger or smaller. And once he saw a row of new houses, and he was truly amazed, and he said:
> 'What do these houses mean? Truly, no great soul has placed them here, as a parable of itself! ...
> And these parlors and chambers, can *men* go in and out here? ...'

[9] I have somewhere else presented to what an extent and how much the "Ins-Bild-Kommen" (To come into a representation/image) can be dealt with (see Sloterdijk, 1998; 1999).

> And Zarathustra stood still and reflected. At last he said sadly, '*Everything* has become smaller!
> Everywhere I see lower gateways; whoever is like *me* can still pass through, but—he has to stoop! ...
> I walk among these people and keep my eyes open; they have become *smaller* and are becoming even smaller: *but this is because of their teaching on happiness and virtue.* ...
> A few of them will, but most of them are merely willed. ...
> Round, righteous and kind they are to one another, like grains of sand are round, righteous and kind to one another.
> To modestly embrace a small happiness—that they call 'resignation'... .
> At bottom these simple ones want one simple thing: that no one harm them. ...
> To them virtue is whatever makes modest and tame; this is how they made the wolf into the dog and mankind himself into mankind's favorite pet' " (pages 133 – 135).

Without doubt, buried in this rhapsodic poetry is a theoretical discourse about man as a taming and nurturing power. From Zarathustra's perspective, modern men are primarily profitable breeders who have made out of wild men the Last Men. It is clear that this could not be done with humanistic education alone. With the thesis of men as breeders of men, the humanistic horizons have been pried apart, so that the humanist can no longer only think, but can move on to questions of taming and nurture. The humanist directs himself to the human, and applies to him his taming, training, educational tools, convinced, as he is, of the necessary connection between reading, sitting, and taming.

Nietzsche, who read Darwin and Saint Paul equally carefully, thought to see behind the horizon of scholarly man-taming a second, darker horizon. He perceived a space in which the unavoidable battle over the direction of man-breeding would begin—and this is the space of the other, the veiled, face of the Clearing. As Zarathustra wandered through the city in which everyone had grown smaller, he saw the results of a so-far profitable and uncontested breeding-politics. People had succeeded in diminishing themselves through a collaboration of ethics and genetics. They have domesticated themselves and have committed themselves to a breeding program aimed at a pet-like accommodation. From this insight springs Zarathustra's specific criticism of humanism as a denial of the false harmlessness with which the modern good man surrounds himself. Actually, it would not be a good thing if men bred themselves or other men for harmlessness. Nietzsche's suspicion of humanistic culture is intended to bring to light the secret of the domestication of humanity. He wants to reveal, by name and function, the people who until now have had a monopoly on the control of breeding—the priests and teachers who pretend to be friends of man—and to initiate a modern, momentous public battle between different breeders and breeding programs.

This is the root of the basic conflict Nietzsche postulates for the future: the battle between those who wish to breed for minimization and those who wish to breed for maximization of human function, or, as we might say, a battle between humanists and superhumanists. The image of the superman that is emblematic of Nietzsche's thought is not that of a release of repressions or a swerve into bestialization, as was imagined by the booted evil Nietzsche readers of the 1930s. Nor does it stand for a regression of humanity back to what it was before the current status of house pet and church pet. When Nietzsche speaks of the *übermensch* he is imagining an era of the world far in the future.[10] He takes into consideration the previous millennia-long processes,

[10] Fascist readers stubbornly misrepresented him, pretending that his distinction referred to them and the present day, describing the difference between themselves and ordinary men.

the application of intimate constraints of breeding, taming, and raising, through which until now human beings have been produced—a production, admittedly, that knew how to make itself virtually invisible and that succeeded in the project of domestication under the disguise of schooling.

With this suggestion—and it is neither possible nor desirable to see it as more than a suggestion—Nietzsche opened a spacious arena within which the specification of the man of the future must be played out, whether or not we return to the concept of the übermensch. It may well be that Zarathustra was the spokesman of a philosophical hysteria whose infectious effect is today, and perhaps forever, banished. But the discourse about difference and the control of taming and breeding—indeed, just the suggestion about the decline of awareness of how human beings are produced, and intimations of anthropotechnology—these are prospects from which we may not, in the present day, avert our eyes, lest they once again be presented as harmless. Nietzsche probably went too far when he suggested that the defanging of men was the premeditated project of a group of pastoral breeders—that is, a project of clerical or Pauline insight that foresaw everything that men might be capable of if they were free and left to themselves, and so instituted compensatory and preventative measures against it. That would certainly be a hybrid thought, because for one thing he imagined a potential breeding project being carried out in much too short a period—as if only a few generations of priest craft were required to turn wolves into dogs or ordinary men into professors in Basel (cf Dufour, 1999). It is implausible as well because it presupposes a conscious agent, where actually a breeding without breeder, an agentless biocultural drift, is more likely. Still, even after we bracket the exaggeration and fierce anticlericalism, there remains of Nietzsche's idea a solid kernel, sufficient to encourage reflection on the humanistic defanging of humanity.

The domestication of man is the great unthinkable, from which humanism from antiquity to the present has averted its eyes. Recognizing this suffices to plunge us into deep waters. And in those deep waters we are flooded with the realization that at no time was it, or will it be, possible to accomplish the taming and befriending of men with letters alone. Certainly, reading was a great power for the upbringing and improvement of men. It still is today, to some extent. But, nonetheless, breeding, whatever form it may have taken, was always present as the power behind the mirror. Reading and breeding have more to do with each other than cultural historians are able or willing to admit. Even if it is impossible to adduce evidence for this suspicion, or to pin down the relation between the two, the connection is nonetheless more than a random suggestion.

Literacy itself, at least until the very recent accomplishment of universal literacy, has had a sharply selective sorting effect. It sharply divided our culture and created a yawning gulf between the literate and the illiterate, a gulf that in its insuperability amounted almost to a species differentiation. If, despite Heidegger's prohibition, one wanted to speak anthropologically, one could define humans of the historical period as animals, some of whom could read or write. By taking a single step further, one could define them as animals that reproduce or breed themselves, while other animals are bred—an idea that has been current as part of Europe's pastoral folklore since Plato. This is similar to Nietzsche's claim in Zarathustra that few of the people in small houses will to live there. Most are willed into them. They are objects, not agents, of selection.

It is characteristic of our technological and anthropotechnological age that people willingly fall more and more into the active, or agent, side of selection, without having to be forced into the role of selectors. As evidence, it can be noted that there is something suspicious in the power of the vote, and it will soon become one way of

avoiding guilt for people to explicitly refuse to exercise the power of selection that they actually have available to them [Sloterdijk (1989), remarks on the ethics of acts of omission and 'retarding' as a progressive function]. But, as soon as an area of knowledge has developed, people begin to look bad if they still, as in their earlier period of innocence, allow a higher power, whether it is the gods, chance, or other people, to act in their stead, as they might have in earlier periods when they had no alternative. Because abstaining or omitting will eventually be insufficient, it will become necessary in the future to formulate a codex of anthropotechnology and to confront this fact actively. Such a codex will retroactively alter the meaning of the old humanism, for it will be made explicit, and codified, that humanity is not just the friendship of man with man, but that man has become the higher power for man.

Nietzsche was conscious of something like this when he dared to consider himself, in respect of his influence, a force majeure. One can understand the anger that is aroused in the world by such a claim when it precedes its justification by several centuries, if not several thousand years. Who has the nerve to imagine a period when Nietzsche will be as far in our past as Plato was from Nietzsche? It suffices for now to make clear that for the next period of time species politics will be decisive. That is, when it will be learned whether humanity (or at least its culturally decisive faction) will be able to achieve effective means of self-taming. A titanic battle is being waged in our contemporary culture between the civilizing and the bestializing impulses and their associated media. Certainly, any great success in taming would be surprising in the face of an unparalleled wave of social developments that seems to be irresistibly eroding inhibitions.[(11)] But whether this process will also eventuate in a genetic reform of the characteristics of the species; whether the present anthropotechnology portends an explicit future determination of traits; whether human beings as a species can transform birth fatalities into optimal births and prenatal selection[(12)]—these are questions with which the evolutionary horizon, as always vague and risky, begins to glimmer.

It is characteristic of being human that human beings are presented with tasks that are too difficult for them, without having the option of avoiding them because of their difficulty. This unavoidable provocation of the human by the unattainable left an unmistakable trace on the earliest stage of Western philosophy. Perhaps philosophy itself, in the widest sense, is that trace. After what has been said it will not be a surprise that this earliest trace took the form of a discourse over shepherding and breeding man. In his dialogue *Politikos* [which we choose to translate as *The Statesman* (1995)], Plato gave us the Magna Charta of European pastoral philosophy. This text is significant for several reasons. First, it shows more clearly than anywhere else what antiquity meant by 'thinking' (the achievement of truth through careful division or separation of ideas and things). Its preeminent status in the history of thought about human beings lies in its simultaneously being presented as a specialists' discussion among shepherds, and also as being about the selection of a statesman of a sort not found in Athens, and the creation of citizens of a sort not found in any state. It is no accident, perhaps, that the dialogue progresses with the participation of what were for Plato some unusual participants—a Stranger and the young Socrates, as though

[(11)] I refer here to the upsurge of violence that is currently erupting in schools in the entire West, particularly in the USA, where teachers are beginning to construct systems of protection against students. As in antiquity, the book lost the struggle with the theater, so today the school could lose the struggle with the indirect forces of education, such as television, violent movies, and other media of disinhibition, if no new acculturation structure for the suppression of violence arises.

[(12)] In more general terms, whether they can transform them through the manipulation of biological risk (an enlarged formulation).

ordinary Athenians were not to be allowed to participate in such discussions. So this Stranger and his interlocutor, Socrates Junior, set themselves the task of imposing transparently rational rules on the politics (or city-shepherding) of their day.

With this project, Plato prompted an intellectual discomfort in the human zoo that could never again be completely quieted. Since *The Statesman* (1995) and *The Republic*, there have been discourses which speak of human society as if it were a zoo which is at the same time a theme park: the keeping of men in parks or stadiums seems from now on a zoo-political task. What are presented as reflections on politics are actually foundational reflections on rules for the maintenance of the human zoo. If there is one virtue of human beings which deserves to be spoken about in a philosophical way, it is above all this: that people are not forced into political theme parks but, rather, put themselves there. Humans are self-fencing, self-shepherding creatures. Wherever they live, they create parks around themselves. In city parks, national parks, provincial or state parks, eco-parks—everywhere people must create for themselves rules according to which their comportment is to be governed.

What is required of the Platonic zoo and its newer instantiations above all is to determine whether there is a difference between the populace and its leadership, and whether that difference is a graduated one or a specific one. According to the first assumption, the difference, the distance, between the herders and their charges is only accidental and pragmatic. One could accord to such a herd the capacity to choose its own shepherds. But, if there is a sharp difference between the people who run the zoo and the people who live in it, then they are so basically different that it would not be advisable for them to elect leaders. They should, rather, have governance by insight. Only a deceptive zoo director, a pseudo-statesmen or political sophist, would promote himself as one of the people. The true shepherd acknowledges difference and discretely allows it to be known that he, because he leads through insight, stands closer to the gods than the confused populace he governs.

Plato's dangerous sense for dangerous ideas lies within the blind spot of all high-culture pedagogues and politicos—in particular, his admission of the actual inequality of people before the knowledge that power gives. In the logical form of a grotesque search for definitions the dialogue develops the preamble of a political anthropotechnology. It is not just a matter of pacifically directing the herd which has already tamed itself; it is a question of systematically generating new, idealized, exemplary individuals. The exercise begins so humorously that the not-quite-so-funny ending could easily be submerged in laughter. What could be more grotesque than the definition of politics as the discipline that concerns itself with the herd animals who travel by foot?—for leaders of men, the gods know, exercise their skill not on animals that swim, but on land animals. Among land animals, one must distinguish between herding the feathered and the unfeathered, since man does not have wings and feathers. The Stranger in Plato's dialogue adds that even among these there are two clearly distinguishable sorts, the horned and hornless animals. Of course, a knowledgeable interlocutor does not need to hear that twice. The two groups correspond to two arts of shepherding, herding the horned and herding the hornless; and obviously one will find the true shepherd of men only by excluding the shepherds of horned animals. For, if herders of horned animals are allowed to govern men, nothing could be expected but overreactions from inappropriate or only apparently appropriate shepherds. The good king, the *basileus*, the Stranger claims, governs a herd of hornless animals (1995, 265d). And that is not all; since, after all, he has the task of herding animals all of one breeding species—that is, animals that do not copulate outside of their species, as horses and asses can—then he must look to their breeding as well, trying to minimize endogamy, bastardization, or hybridization. So we list the differentia: wingless, hornless, pairing only with

their like—and, finally, bipedality, or, as we moderns might say, erect posture. So the art of shepherding appropriate to wingless hornless species-specific-breeding bipeds is isolated as the true art and distinguished from all false contenders. But this custodial shepherding must itself be bifurcated into the voluntary or the tyrannically imposed. Should the tyrannical form in its turn be revealed as a false and deceptive illusion, only the true political art remains: the voluntary shepherding of voluntarily submitting living beings (276e).[13]

Up to this point Plato has presented his doctrine of the art of statesmanship entirely in pictures of shepherds and herds. He has chosen among dozens of misleading representations of this art the one true picture, the valid concept of the thing in question. But now that we have an adequate definition the dialogue switches to another metaphor—not in order to undermine the previous accomplishment, but in order to force into the light the most difficult piece of human herding, the management of reproduction. The famous image of the statesman as weaver comes into play. The true, the real, basis for the art of the king lies not in the vote of the public, which gives or withholds trust from their rulers as it will. Nor does it lie in inherited privilege or recent accumulation of power. The Platonic master finds the reason for his mastery only in the expertise he has in the odd and peculiar art of breeding. Here we see the reemergence of the expert-king, whose justification is the insight about how, without doing damage to their free will, human beings can best sort themselves out and make connections. Royal anthropotechnology, in short, demands of the statesman that he understand how to bring together free but suggestible people in order to bring out the characteristics that are most advantageous to the whole, so that under his direction the human zoo can achieve the optimum homeostasis. This comes about when the two relative optima of human character—warlike courage and philosophical–humanistic contemplation—are woven together in the tapestry of the species.

But because in their extremes both virtues can lead to distortions—the one, militaristic warmongering with its bad consequences, the other, quietism and privatization which can so stupefy the land that it falls into servitude without ever noticing it—the statesman has to exclude the inappropriate natures before he begins to weave the chosen ones into the fabric of the state. Only with the remaining noble and free natures will the good state be created. The courageous provide the heavier fibers, the moderates the softer ones. As Schleiermacher might have put it in somewhat anachronistic terms, the level-headed are designated as cultural workers.

> "What we're saying, then, is that the work of a weaver-statesman is complete when he has woven these two types of human character—the courageous and the restrained—into a tight fabric. It is complete when a king with his knowledge makes sure that consensus and loyalty are the materials out of which he constructs their communal life, and so creates the most magnificent and excellent fabric there can be—a seamless cloth in which he enfolds all his subjects, whether slave or free..." (Plato, 1995, 311b–c).

For the modern reader, who looks back on the humanistic gymnasia of the bourgeois state and at the fascist eugenics already foreshadowing the biotechnological era, the explosiveness of these considerations is unavoidable. What Plato puts in the mouth of the Stranger is the program of a humanistic society that is embodied in a single full-humanist, the lord of royal shepherding. The task of this über-humanist would be no less than arranging that an elite is reared with certain characteristics, each of which must be present for the good of the whole.

[13] Plato exegetes such as Karl Popper gladly overlook this doubled instance of 'voluntarily'.

There is a complication. The Platonic shepherd is a true shepherd only because he embodies the earthly copy of the unique and original True Shepherd, God, who in the preexistence, under the lordship of Chronos, protected man directly. One cannot forget that, even for Plato, God is the only possible protector and breeder of men. Now, though, after the great turnabout, when under the leadership of Zeus the gods retreated and handed over to humans the task of governing themselves, the wise have been left as the only worthy shepherds and breeders, for they have the best recollection of the divine shadows. Without the model presented by the wise, the care of man by man would be hopeless.

Two thousand years after Plato wrote it seems as if not only the gods but the wise have abandoned us, and left us alone with our partial knowledge and our ignorance. What is left to us in the place of the wise is their writings, in their glinting brilliance and their increasing obscurity. They still lay in more or less accessible editions; they can still be read, if only one knew why one should bother. It is their fate—to stand in silent bookshelves, like posted letters no longer collected, sent to us by authors, of whom we no longer know whether or not they could be our friends.

Letters that are not mailed cease to be missives for possible friends; they turn into archived things. Thus this—that the important books of the past have more and more ceased to be letters to friends, and that they do not lie any longer on the tables and nightstands of their readers—this has deprived the humanistic movement of its previous power. Less and less often do archivists climb up to the ancient texts in order to reference earlier statements of modern commonplaces. Perhaps it occasionally happens that in such researches in the dead cellars of culture the long-ignored texts begin to glimmer, as if a distant light flickers over them. Can the archives also come into the Clearing? Everything suggests that archivists have become the successors of the humanists. For the few who still peer around in those archives, the realization is dawning that our lives are the confused answer to questions which were asked in places we have forgotten.

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