

# **Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle: Essay on the foundations of an existential anthropology**

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**Abstract:** This article is presented as an essay seeking to construct an anthropological epistemology centered on an observation of the human being as entity. Critical of the history of anthropology as social and cultural, the author calls upon Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle. The Parmenidean notion of being, folded on it, serves the author to consider that there is an entity to be observed. The allegory of the cave allows him to make an analogy between the gaze of the prisoners and those of the anthropologists. From Plato himself, the allegory is positively followed by an invitation to look at reality in its imperfections. Aristotle allows, especially from the notion of substance, a large set of empirical interrogations focused on a human being. The author sees in these different texts the foundations of an existential anthropology.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, Parmenides, Plato, human being, observation, existential anthropology, singularity

## **Introduction**

Allow me, as a pretext for this article, a personal note. In previous writings, I have sometimes referred to statements of Greek philosophers, putting them in dialogue with contemporary philosophers, soliciting them to support this or that idea, discovering in them a decisive element to think what I wanted to think, especially the human being.

While preparing in the fall of 2022 the sessions of a seminar on “Humans, Humanity”, in the program of a specific Master's course in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Paris Nanterre, I was surprised to notice that each lesson mobilized at least one text of Greek philosophy, without this being premeditated or pre-decided. It was not a matter of finding the ethical values associated with a

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humanism that could indeed be nourished in Greek texts. It was a question each time of thinking an anthropological epistemology capable of posing the human being and each human being for himself as an incontestable focus - which means that he is not then fragmented for example in his psychic dimension or that he is not looked at with others in sociocultural wholes.

I discovered thus the different reasons for which I resorted to these philosophers: Parmenides as a thinker of the being folded on itself; Plato, with the allegory of the cave, as a reflection on the look and what is to be looked at, with also a possibility of focusing on the imperfections of the being; Aristotle, as the founder of anthropology, with his conceptualization of the substance in its limit and also its movement. Each time, I came up against different positions in anthropology. This awareness made me write these lines, knowing that a specialist of Greek philosophy could not be satisfied, nor a historian of philosophy. This paper is only an “essay” about some statements of Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle that seem to me to be heuristic in view of an existential anthropology of the human being.

For more than a century, in scientific institutions, the association of “anthropology” with the understanding of social and cultural diversities has reflected on its reconstructed history and on the choice of its founding father, Herodotus, known by his “Histories”, a compilation of accounts from travels around Greece, Egypt and Asia Minor. Historians of anthropology rarely miss this reminder of Herodotus as an ethnographer, characterizing him as close to the attitude of contemporary anthropologists: the study of the variety of cultures and social facts.

With Parmenides, Plato and especially Aristotle, it is another beginning that could have been possible. The anthropological epistemology presented here is relevant because we can worry about the “liquefaction” of human beings in anthropology. Not only because it is interested in societies and cultures, i.e. in being *as* social or cultural. This is all the more delicate because sociologies share this characteristic and, above all, as Francis Wolff has clearly formulated it, the principle of “as” certainly constitutes a filtering but a way of “saturating” the object, as if in this case the human being was only sociocultural, was totally sociocultural (Wolff 2010, 85-86). But also, concerning this dissolution of the human in anthropology, the worst or the maximum has just happened, with the valorized acceptance that the idea of “Anthropos” is not tenable (Henare et al. 2007, 10) or that the

future of anthropology consists in dealing with what surrounds the human (Descola 2013). Is the human being so contemptible that he is not wanted as a radical object of anthropology, to which objects and the environment are preferred today, and to which cultures and social relations were preferred yesterday?

### **Parmenides: there is an entity to be observed**

In the foundations of Greek philosophy, Parmenides is the philosopher of the ball. It is one of his strong points, reminding us that there is an entity to be grasped and to be observed, a “being”. He does not designate a being in particular, for example a human being, since he indicates that it is neither born nor dies<sup>1</sup>. But the characteristics of the being in question are intriguing. Parmenides presents it as non-divisible, in one piece, all alike, “in the coils of huge bonds”, and he adds that a “strong necessity holds it in the bondage of a limit, which keeps it apart”, remaining the same, “like the volume of a spherical ball, and equally poised in every direction from its centre”, without having more or less being here and there (Coxon 2009, 72-78). This is short, but radical. This full and complete ball is the symbol of what a good part of contemporary philosophy and social sciences stigmatizes. It is in this sense that Parmenides becomes a heuristic. By presenting this ball thus tightened in its internal links, autorelated, this text seems to me decisive to invite to think that there is indeed an entity to be observed, include a human being. Entirety, indivisibility and tightening around oneself: these three characteristics confer a well-defined reality to a human being as if placed there in front of a possible observer.

What is indeed interesting is to see how philosophers of the 20th century present a human being ahead of himself, out of himself, disarticulated. It is as if the entity itself loses not only a hold to be looked at, but also an interest in itself. Deleuze is very clear on this subject, perceiving in this type of Parmenidian reading a mark of Western thought, that of “a substantial, completed and well-constituted subject” (Deleuze 1994, 118). This critique, which privileges a thought of an individual “with no fixed identity, forever decentered” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 20), with “the relative, floating and fluid character of individuality itself” (Deleuze 1994, 258), comes at the cost of the possibility of looking at and describing a human being. For this exercise of observation requires some solid grip, without considering

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<sup>1</sup> Parmenides does not deny alterations and contrary forces, such as light and night.

that one has before one something that slips, that “knows nothing of substance and form” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 507), that prefers “heterogeneous” and retains only “that which increases the number of connections” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 508). In the Deleuzian philosophy, “a body is not a thing, a substance, it does not have real outlines, and it exists only in that it affects and is affected” (Zourabichvili 1994, 101). There is no “lever” to observe, and moreover, there are indeed “others” – other humans, animals, events, etc.: the “haecceity” of which it is question in the work of Deleuze does not say the individual singularity but the event and the instantaneity of what happens, as an intensity distinguishing itself from another. What Deleuze is looking for are not characters, identity, or qualities, but eventual haecceities by which each thing, he writes, “loses its center” (Deleuze 1993, 174). In this order of ideas, according to the anthropologist Viveiros de Castro claiming his affinity and that of the Amerindian myths with the Deleuzian thought, “each persona infinitely differs from itself », by his capacity to be another one in a “self- difference” permanent or in a “fluent intensive difference” (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 66-67). What counts is the “becoming”, more important than the terms themselves, seen as the “movement of difference”, escaping unity, in a world where “bodies and names, souls and actions, egos and others are interpenetrated”, where “self-identical entities” are replaced by “immediately relational multiplicities” (Ibid., 73).

The representation of an “ungraspable” human and in connection with other beings is present in other contemporary philosophical texts, under varied forms. According to elements of language that are typical to him, the individual is not for Merleau-Ponty (2005, 255) a “real unity” but always “indivisibly demolished and remade by the course of time”. The body “is not where it is, nor what it is” (Ibid., 229), and if it allows existence to evade the world, “the body never quite falls back on to itself” (Ibid., 191). Speaking about the human being, Sartre indicates that he does not mean “a stable substance which rests in itself”, but “a perpetual disequilibrium, a wrenching away from itself with all its body” (Sartre 1963, 151). The human being is thus the one that takes off from itself, an ex-existence coming out of its possibility. To put it abruptly, such a human being is not considered to be observed: “outside of oneself”, unstable, in the unbalance, in the reversal, and necessarily with the others, an individual, this individual, cannot but escape observation. He is beyond observation.

Would German philosophical anthropology be different? The Heideggerian being-in-the-world sums up a good part of the themes of the social sciences under various modes and tonalities: relational being, being with, being situated, immersed, etc., thought with the others, in its actions and its activities, and, ultimately, also a “being-ahead-of-oneself-already-being-in-the-world” (Heidegger 2010, 192), beyond itself and opened to. The concept of existence as an “ecstatic structure” insists on the “fact of being outside of oneself” (Dastur 1998, xxx). There is at least a consequence: the idea according to which “the ‘authentic’ meaning of the temporality of a finite being springs from the future, that is, from the anticipation of death” (Ibid.) moves away from a thought of succession of “nows” along on a timeline (Heidegger 2010, 422). Heidegger reproaches this to Aristotle. Thus the moments of the continuing being are not considered important. Once again, being is ungraspable. There is not even an entity supposed to be before an observer.

While Helmuth Plessner maintains an identity, which consists of “starting ‘from’ something, supposedly identical (to oneself), as coming back ‘to’ it” (Plessner 2017, 128), the concept of “eccentric positionality” allows him to say in turn that “man stands outside of himself” (Ibid., 455), that he is this “being-out-of-self” (Ibid., 448), while remaining “bodily animal” (Ibid.). Plessner sees there the source of a fluctuating and fragile dimension of the human unit, with hiatuses and lability, but also existing with others, in a culture and relations. It is the other that will tear the human being away from an egocentric positioning, develop his eccentric functioning which is not a “natural” dimension and break the “compactness of all-to-self” and bring about non-identity to one. The focus shifts to this movement in question, the out-of-self-ahead-self, as showing that it is not the entity itself that is relevant to be observed, but what the direction of the movement is towards, especially the others.

It would thus be possible to align such thoughts of the exit from oneself, looking for their nuances and specificities. The recurrence of this movement becomes all the more evident by its contrast to the idea of Parmenides’ ball. It is no longer the decentering or the disarticulation which are original, but the idea of an identity-totality. Certainly the ball that can constitute a human being is not perfect, nor complete - it is obvious, but it becomes a strong thought to look at a being in its tightened entity.

### **Plato's cave: what to observe?**

For good observation, one must understand the modes of avoidance by which the observer bypasses the human being. The Allegory of the Cave, a text of exceptional force, abundantly commented on, susceptible of various readings, is of great heuristicity to this effect. I will show that the Allegory of the Cave leads us to the very heart of the mode of knowledge that is constitutive of the history of anthropology. This is also what it would be an allegory of: it makes us understand anthropology in its various ways of looking.

Plato's allegory of the cave means that we would look, without turning our heads, at shadows of reality. And once freed, pushed to look at it, we would not succeed, as dazzled, like the prisoners of the cave. They must not only free themselves from their gaze accustomed to shadows, but also learn to look at reality.

Let us take up Plato's text, at the beginning of Book VII of *The Republic*:

Imagine an underground chamber like a cave, with a long entrance open to the daylight and as wide as the cave. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads (Plato 2007, 514a).

Imagine further that there are men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall, projecting above it and including figures of men and animals made of wood and stone and all sorts of other materials, and that some of these men, as you would expect, are talking and some not. And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent (Ibid., 514b-515a).

In these conditions, the captives thought that "the shadows of the objects we mentioned were the whole truth". And what would it be like for them "if they were released from their bonds and cured of their delusions"? To the first prisoner thus delivered suddenly, this would happen, as Plato's text tells us: "all these actions would be painful and he would be too dazzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see the shadows" (Plato 2007, 515d). And moreover he discovers that these objects are worn by human beings. "He would need to grow accustomed", continues the text (Ibid., 516a). And in this learning, stage, he would not quickly get rid of what his eyes were used to: the shadows of the objects, their number, and their order of passage. And this is what he would see again once he would turn to the objects. And

gradually he would look at the real objects and then he would notice that these objects are held by humans talking or being silent, as the allegory points out. And as he did with the objects, he would look at the relationships between the humans holding them, the ones who are passing by most often, the ones who are leading the group, and he would try to understand the logic of the group. And then, only after this step, he would learn to look at the humans themselves.

What Plato tells us about this first delivered prisoner indeed sheds light on the history of anthropology. First, like captives, anthropologists would be fixed on the shadows of what they do not want to look at: human beings. The shadows would be the realities (that however depend on humans themselves): cultures, social systems, diverse cultural productions (myths, systems of thought, objects), and that anthropologists would first aim at. Then, once diverted from this gaze, anthropologists would begin to see humans, but it would be parts of humans, emotions, actions, interactions, relations, intersubjectivities that they would seek to understand. But on the one hand, they are only parts of humans; on the other hand and above all, anthropologists look at them, in situations, contexts, cultures and social systems – Plato's shadows -, by putting these humans in connection and in groups. Thus they "add", as if to reduce the dazzling effect in front of a human being.

And so anthropologists add to their study themes beings in relation, elements of situations (an event, institutions, objects), cultural and socio-historical contexts, environments, the anthropologist himself. An individual is assimilated, in interaction, in intersubjectivity, stuck to other elements, emerging on one side, linked on the other. In all cases, it is "turned towards" and these other elements take on a significant dimension, whether they are inserted in a synthetic "they" or in the portrait of a particular individual. An epistemological reversal, to which the extraction of the Parmenidian ball invited, would consist in looking radically at a human entity, one at a time, and in leaving the context very much in the background, as simple information. Beyond the awareness of the modes of looking, does the Platonic philosophy really invite to this epistemological reversal, the text of the cave ultimately wanting to tell us that the important is "elsewhere"?

In his *Anthropologie philosophique*, Bernard Groethuysen contrasts Plato and Aristotle in their anthropology. Whereas Plato does not make man the starting point of his anthropology, Aristotle "starts only from the fact of man, from the psycho-physical construction of man".

Plato's man would be like a foreigner because "his soul would not be in its place" (Groethuysen 1980, 49). "One could say", writes Groethuysen (Ibid., 51), "that in Aristotle, the sentence: 'I am a man', obtains for the first time all its significance" while, in the philosophy of Plato, the human condition is "a reduction of its soul". With Aristotle, "the normal man is going to lose the negative meaning" that he had in Plato (Ibid., 58). Bernard Groethuysen is probably not wrong, but there is a positive possibility of taking Plato literally, in a way.

To this end, it is a matter of forgetting the allegory of the cave, of not leaving Plato only as inviting us to look "beyond" and wanting to tell us that reality is elsewhere. In this sense, he would be like the philosophers mentioned above and like the anthropologists themselves. I mean that the fact that a human, this human, is only a pale reflection of another reality must also incite us to look at the cracks that characterize it, the gaps of the concrete reality. It is a way to find the ball of Parmenides in its imperfection. Hence, it is not presence and consciousness, the one and the other as perfect, which impose themselves to the observer - as it can commonly be said about the Western metaphysics -, but more precisely a presence which is not one, a consciousness which is itself always veiled. Thus, the observers, when they are delivered of various readings, are in front of a being which is "less", but which is there. According to the comments of Emmanuelle Rousset, if we read *The Sophist* as a dialogue on "the intermittences of the being", we discover a thought of the failure of the beings which are not perfect, absolute, total, completed. Thus, "the theory of the ideas is elaborated on this analysis of the failure of the present things, made of non-being" (Rousset 2009, 18). If "the pot is beautiful", it is thus important to specify how it "is not completely" beautiful. It is then up to the observer to look for the details to specify that it is not absolutely beautiful, that it is incomplete and imperfect - and one never goes far enough in this quest. Thus, "things do not live up to their idea": this is what it appears when we look at them well, and even better when we look continuously at a human being, five minutes, an hour or several hours. Unfinished aspects - details - emerge in acts, words and thoughts. It is enough to take this continuous look to be astonished by the importance of the nothings, the voids, and the incompletes. For the anthropologist, a Platonic lesson would be to hold as relevant, that humans do not really manage to do, to be with others.



In this order of ideas, one of the major flaws of the human beings concerns the relations. They are only properties of the beings, which “try”, in the incompleteness of the moments and the situations. The relations are relations of beings remaining ineluctably separated. Thus they fail to link. They are only beginnings. Rilke’s words are strong about those people who “try to reach each other with words and gestures. They almost tear their arms out of their sockets, because the reach of their gesticulations is much too short. They never stop trying to throw syllables at each other, but they are extraordinarily bad at this game: they cannot catch” (Rilke 2009, fr. X). To observe this in detail, it is not the being in relation which is then to be observed, it is even less the relation, it is the being continuing in the thickness of the moments.

### **Aristotle: this human**

So there is a human entity and it is full of details that are good to be observed. Indeed, as Bernard Groethuysen said, Aristotle invites us from a specific conceptualization to clarify our focus on the human being. I can get there now. His *Metaphysics* in particular is a reservoir of questions for empirical explorations of a human being. From a free interpretation<sup>2</sup>, the following notes are meant to be an invitation to such explorations.

There is a preliminary remark. Aristotle insisted on the classification of sciences and the disciplinary attribution of an object to be studied. Beside the metaphysics which, according to Aristotle, studies the being as being, the various “departmental disciplines” cut out “some section of what is” (Aristotle 2004, 1003a), each of which focuses on the aspects of the human being that are of interest: thus the quantitative being for mathematics, the being in movement for physics or the being as it lives for biology. There would also be beings as they are in relation: I would see in this the theme of sociology, of which social and cultural anthropologies participate. Why wouldn’t there be the being as a human entity? It would answer, or at least try to answer the following question: why are humans what they are? Why or how each one is what he is? Of this entity, it would not be either the biological, anatomical and genetic aspects, which constitute it as a living being. It would be the entity as it exists, passes the minutes and

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<sup>2</sup> For interpretations of Aristotle’s anthropology, the reader may also refer to Clark (1975), Fraisse (1976), Loux (2006), Keil and Kreft (2019), Weil (2000). Aubenque’s book (2009) was decisive for my reading of Aristotle.

the days. I would see there the thematic of existential anthropology centered on the existing one as entity and entirety in its continuity. It would not be thus fragmented to the only aspects of the psyche reserved to the psychological sciences.

The astonishment that things are what they are, wrote Aristotle: let us see how Aristotle's metaphysics is the very basis of such an existential anthropology. In order to study a human being as he exists, one of Aristotle's central concepts is that of "substance". "The clearest case where substance is present is that of bodies," he notes (Aristotle 2004, 1028b). This may seem paradoxical. But the aforementioned existentialist rejection of substance implies precisely a lack of grasp about an entity considered as elusive. This substance is not, however, a fixed entity, nor is it dissociated from "the first matter underlying anything which has its own source of motion and change" (Aristotle 2008, 193a).

Substance concerns simple bodies (Aristotle 2004, 1017b): "Given that there are some things that are separate and some that are not separate, it is the latter that are substances" wrote Aristotle (Ibid., 1070b). An individual is a substance that can be seen only in a separate state. Aristotle precises the "limit" of each substance: "the extreme point of a particular, the first point outside which no part of the thing can be found and inside which all parts of the thing can be found" (Ibid., 1022a)<sup>3</sup>.

Aristotle adds the dimension of ontological hierarchy, indicating a more precise meaning of substance. Substances are such "because, far from their being predicated of some subject, the other things are predicated of them" (Aristotle 2004, 1017b). He wonders:

Are walking and being healthy and sitting each a thing-that-is or not [...]? For none of them is either something that can exist per se or that can be separated from substance; rather is it the case that if there is anything here that is a thing-that-is it is that which is doing the walking, the sitting or the being healthy. It is things that are doing something in this way that it would seem more plausible to consider things-that-are, and for the following reason. There is, in their case, *something defined that underlies* and it is this which is their substance and particular (Aristotle 2004, 1028a).

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<sup>3</sup> Limit, substance, being: the reader understands that I regret that we have mostly lost the methodological force of this lexicon. It is enough to read what Deleuze writes on this subject; see for example, <https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/38>.

A substance is an entity continuing to exist, thus characterised by various variable qualities, actions, relations or affections, at such and such a time, in such and such a place, which generate different impacts on what could be called its consistency: “*a what-it-was-to-be-that-thing only belongs to those things for whom an account just is a definition*” (Aristotle 2004, 1030a). The term “quiddity” is also often used by commentators to designate “an individual and determined essence”.

On this subject, Pierre Aubenque’s comments are very timely and contrary to some preconceptions: “Aristotle is not satisfied with universal discourses and generic definitions: since things are singular, it is in their singularity that they must be grasped” (Aubenque 2009, 463). Aristotle himself notes that: “For a principle of particular things must itself be a particular thing. It is true that man is a principle of man at the universal level, but there is no man in reality. Rather it is Peleus that is the motive cause of Achilles and your father that is yours” (Aristotle 2004, 1071a).

But what is this quiddity, this determination of a being, which appears under, not under Socrates, but under Socrates standing, sitting, and crouching? Wouldn’t Achilles also be the principle of Achilles, from his components, the tendencies, the modes of being, determining, causing, infiltrating, impregnating his gestures, his words, his actions? We are thus dealing with an organising principle of substance, the “form” that confers structure and unity. It would also be possible to speak of a structuring *eidōs*. This would be the existential substratum, not matter, but a consistency that will not break away from the entity to which it is attached, i.e. substance (as a complete entity). Is it not the job of an anthropologist to observe this?

Let us take an example from Aristotle:

Someone is digging a trench for a plant and finds treasure. This finding of the treasure is an accident for the man who digs the trench. It is not the case that finding treasure necessarily comes from or after digging a trench, nor would one for the most part in doing some planting find treasure (Aristotle 2004, 1025a).

From this chance, this individual has become rich, has started new actions, and has acquired new characteristics. Any insignificant gesture, an “accident”, can thus have at least indirectly strong effects, and we only know this afterwards and sometimes long afterwards. This is why Pierre Aubenque proposes his interpretation: it is when the

individual is dead that it would be possible, once we have observed all these facts and gestures, to better identify those that remained without consequences, those that had consequences (and what kind of consequences), and that we would determine his singularity. “Only, writes Aubenque, can death, in the case of the living, halt the unpredictable course of life, transmute contingency into retrospective necessity, separate the accidental from what really belongs by itself to the subject who is no longer” (Aubenque 2009, 469). I agree, of course, on the question of the effects that any gesture, any action, can bring about. But on the question of singularity and style - another word for the expression of this consistency - it is different. An anthropologist does not have to wait for death to discover the constitutive elements of a style: a part of it is constituted quite quickly, a kind of consistency with different traits, in-forming many acts and gestures, including those of the discoverer of the treasure, before, during and after his discovery, his own way of digging, of rejoicing, of using his new wealth, etc. The necessary then permeates the accidental. In this case, the observer aims at a way of being, with its different expressions, which indicates, beyond the acts and qualities that follow one another, a 'continuity', “without which the being would lose all unity, at each moving moment, at each new moment”, writes Pierre Aubenque (Ibid., 452) himself. What a human being integrates, through the everyday circumstances and their possible effects that can nuance, but very slowly, his style is thus also in-formed by it and its characteristics.

According to Aristotle's another example, a man becomes this or that, for example cultured, but he remains a man, also this man. It is only a modality that appears, more or less important, which does not transform it entirely. Such a modification does not necessarily affect other characteristics of the entity concerned, in particular its consistency, which may impregnate the way of being cultured. One can think that components of a human being were indeed preparing this modification, ephemeral or lasting: its style which allows us to avoid thinking of change in terms of discontinuity. All of this leads to the necessary observation of a human being continuing from moment to moment, with different questions: how does the style, this consistency or quiddity (according to the used terms), of an individual, with its different expressions, absorb, integrate, at the moment  $t$ , what happens? With what force? To what degree? What, in a human entity, can escape at this same instant  $t$  from the style in particular? What

actions, what gestures? What will then reflect on it, on its various tendencies, modify them, even a little? And what will remain without impact on them?

It is known that Aristotle does not consider a “science of the accidental” possible (Aristotle 2004, 1027a). He specifies that “all science is either of that which is always” but also “that which is for the most part” (Ibid.). On the one hand, in the contingency of accidents and details, anthropology does not of course look for essences but, beyond the observed singularities, for common and general properties, laws or regularities. And to this end, in many texts, Aristotle integrates the part of observation and experience in the research process. On the other hand, and above all, in each substance, within each being, there are constants: this is the very principle of its quiddity or consistency. It is particularly also in the modalities of the act of speaking, eating, walking, in the details of these acts, that such singularity is indicated. It was indeed “him”, one might say, when some look back at his past existence. Thus, in order to observe the course of existence, thoughts, gestures and words, the distinction proposed by Aristotle can regain some relevance: that between the “attributes per se” which necessarily belong to a substance, the attributes which are neither necessary nor constant but which happen “most often” and the accidents which happen “by chance”.

This would also answer the question: what holds a human being together, how does his or her singularity continue, despite his or her permeability to others and the world? Aristotle explicitly wondered about the different modes of composition of beings:

The account of certain things is based on the mode of combination of their matter, which some (e.g. honey-drink) being combined by blending, some (e.g. a besom) by binding, some (e.g. a book) by gluing, some (e.g. a chest) by nailing and some by a combination of combinations (Aristotle 2004, 1042b).

These plays of combinations and structuring between different components can be discovered by an observer of a human being, necessarily one at a time, from continuous and very detailed observations.

Aristotle’s work about individuality leaves an empirical, let’s say anthropological, field to explore. I do not mean to say that Aristotle would have concretised anthropology as I claim from his ‘metaphysics’, whose aim is hardly relationist, but one can think that

‘empiricists’ who had read Aristotle, if they had existed at his time or just after, could have made similar choices, in order to do anthropology<sup>4</sup>.

## Conclusion

Parmenides evokes an abstract being; Plato helps to understand the exercise of looking and to focus on the flaws, while insisting on the other reality, which is the world of Ideas. There are undoubtedly also theoretical elements in Aristotle’s work that may not have directly propelled an empirical anthropology. But, by returning to Aristotle and to the set of questions he poses - those mentioned here are only some of the questions -, rather than to Herodotus, it seems to me possible to remake another history of empirical and theoretical anthropology. Would an anthropology have been a miracle in the ancient Greece of the philosophers? This miracle would have allowed an observer to really confront the philosophical debate with reality, not to look for cultural curiosities, to prefer to systematize his observations and his research on the human being himself.

The miracle did not happen. I consider that it has not yet taken place... I insist on this point, so that this recourse to philosophers of Antiquity is not perceived as being outdated. The history of philosophy is made up of concepts associated with examples taken from everyday life or also imagined. The strictly empirical approach is more recent. In 1800, Gérando proposed a methodological guide for observing cultures. But indeed anthropology has remained on this path, leaving the study of psyches to psychology. The fact remains that this wholeness, the ball of Parmenides or the substance of Aristotle, remains unobserved, for itself. It is as if the empirical possibilities, when they arose at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had immediately given primacy to the socio-cultural or the psychic, missing the entity that exists. It was at this moment that Marx wrote that “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations”. He thus refuses “to presuppose an abstract - isolated - human individual” (Marx 1845, thesis 6). A little earlier, Kant, while insisting on the importance of consciousness, asked how the human “as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can should make of himself” (Kant 2006, 3). It does not escape a human

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle’s reflection is as much about this human as it is about the human as opposed to other living beings, in particular animals. See Keill and Kreft (2019).

being who acts in a situation, as a “citizen of the world”, able to adapt to the conceptions of others, capable of moral action in a “moral world”. The being is clearly caught up with others.

The empirical possibility of looking at a human being thus arrived too late, unless it arrived because he or she was thought of in situation, this situation one taking precedence over the human being, the background taking precedence over the figure, always already with others, other humans, the environment, in a given context. The others, the environment, the context become what explains, the human figure is more or less lost. Of course, “relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so” (James 1986, 37). It is in fact such an extraction that our three philosophers make it possible to think and that an existential anthropology would have to realize. Extraction is not an abstraction. It is a matter of methodologically cutting, like all sciences detaching an object from what surrounds it, where they deem it relevant.

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