

## An Ordeal Around the Existential Question of “What is man?”

*Motto*

“Phoenix Rebirth is easy:  
my shadow also turns into ashes at times.”

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(alias Ivan Karamazov)<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This philosophical attempt – understood not as an experiment but as an ordeal – is an ontological and existential analysis of the real weight of the question: “What is man?”. It arrives to the conclusion, based on an essential inquisitive dialogue with Kant and Heidegger, that this question cannot, and indeed must not, be given a definition-like answer filled with information and facts. The real “response” – and not “answer” – *cor-responding* to the true weight and amplitude of the matter, can only be authentic and open if it claims that: Man is precisely that particular being who turns his own existence – in a questioning way, both for himself and “other” people, interrogating himself via his own world – into an *event*. This also proves that *the human and mode-of-being-like! questions about the meaning of Being and about the possibility of “What is man?” actually overlap both in their horizons and in their amplitude and radicality (depth, roots).*

**Keywords:** man, ontology, existence, questioning, being, Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger.

During his still timely and vivid contemplations on the essence and meanings of philosophising at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Immanuel Kant concluded that philosophy, both in a so-called *cosmopolitico* and *eminenti* meaning, can actually – “in *actus*” – gain its authentic meanings through its articulate and explicit relations to the “end goals or humanity”. It is also important that Kant formulated these end goals as *fundamental questions* distinguished not only because of their importance and greatness, but also because they are end-questions. These are, we know them, “What can I know?”, “What ought I to do?”, “What can I hope for?”.

It is also true that Kant himself connects the hassle with such questions to certain “branches”. And it is not clear about all of these whether and how they relate indeed to philosophy itself. Because, according to Kant, the

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question "What can I hope for?" should be "answered" – at least seemingly – by religion and not by philosophy. (Of course, this is also an end-question, namely that even before we "listened to" and accepted the hopeful answers that religion can give to this question, we should first consider what religion itself actually is.) *Recte*: the end-questions are "ultimate" questions because, on the one hand, one must reach to them – meaning that we must break and build the way that leads to them – and, on the other hand, because we can hardly *pass beyond* their horizons and halos. We cannot go beyond, or know more than, say, the question of "What can I know?". For, at the centre of things, it is only through it that we can know "everything" or "anything". Including that what we do not know (or cannot know).

However, amidst the analytical and constructive meditations on the end-goals of humanity formulated by these end-questions, Kant reaches the conclusion that the relationship between them, the *sending them to each other* and *pertaining to each other takes further of beyond* them. That is to say, the end-goals of humanity actually always send to and meet in a *newer* – but *most important* – (end)question. This question, the ultimate of every end-goal, the ultimate (and most concealed) of every end-question, always sounds: "What is man?" Even if, very problematically, Kant send off the treatment of this issue to a new "discipline", the so-called "anthropology". And which, moreover, he had no time or force left to ask or "elaborate on", no matter how much he considered it a very personal intellectual task<sup>2</sup>.

Regardless of this, the ultimate end-question of "What is man?", and in the philosophical/existential end-goal of human(ity), Kant did not only formulate something advisable or an important task just for himself and the coming generations (of philosophers) but, much rather, he surfaced an aspect which, for philosophy – although in a hidden way, and seen as secondary – has always been and remained *inherent*. With respect both to its essence and its all-time origins and meanings. This, although tiresome, is not "difficult" to point out historically all the way to Husserl, Heidegger or Gadamer.

Therefore we cannot undertake such a task here. My concern is much rather what it means philosophically – for us people, for our being as humans – to ask the question of "What is man?" and, with respect to it, what is the state of this question these days? Or what is our state today?

Man is of course always "concerned" with... man. Whether he wants it or not, whether he "questions" it or not. And this is also the greatest problem with the question "What is man?", and also the greatest difficulty. For, on the one hand, man always shows, "says" about himself what he is, and how he understands or validates himself in this self-revelation, while, on the other hand, he does it in an "a priori" given situatedness in understanding which always also *suppresses* the inevitable, but *explicit* fundamental questioning of himself. Because his "world" is always filled with all kinds of

ready-made answers given or desirably given to this question. This is what the mythologies coming into being even before the appearance of writing, the religions, and also the so-called human sciences do as well, whether these sciences call themselves “natural” or “social”.

The mere existence of these proves that some kind of – basically historical – interpretation and situatedness of itself *pertains* to the being of man. And this is unimaginable without its “being inquired”, that is, questionableness, also pertaining to him.

Consequently, when Kant treats the question of “What is man ?” as the highest and most important issue of philosophy, then he – as every essential thinker all the time – does nothing else in fact than INQUIRINGLY brings to the surface a fundamental ontological aspect of being connected to the essence of man.

This meditation is of course also connected to my previous inquiries, both extending and deepening them. For, in their most important lines, these inquiries and studies, starting from the existential ontology of the *secret* (Király 1996, 318 and Király 2001, 256) articulated the *ontological metaphysics* of human finiteness – *death* (Király 2007, 321; Király 2008, 254 and Király 215, 180), the existential characters of the temporality (*past* and *future*), the ontology of *historicity* and *freedom*, (Király 1999, 156 and Király 2004, 216) and the *existential* questions of *human illness* through the *ontology of possibility* (Király 2011, 204). In the sense of the particular ontological identity of the being called “human”, and the *thematization* of our own *modes of being*<sup>3</sup>.

These meditations take us further to a direction which was already formulated by Kant: “*What is man ?*” It is a great question whose thematisation needs a serious consideration. The most considerable is of course not only the “elaboration” or history of *merely* a more “adequate” “philosophical anthropology” and its research, or *merely* the emphasis of the “philosophical significance” of contemporary anthropological discoveries, but: how does the question and inquiry of “What is man ?”; belongs to man himself in a mode-of-being-like way ?

Therefore the “end-goal” of meditation cannot be a “general definition of man containing useful information”, nor the description of how man “occurs” – then and now. Because all kinds of conceptual “definitions” of man atomises the horizons of the *possibilities* raised by the question and its questioning, and the description of endless conditions of being of how man existed and exists offers no directions as to the ontological essence of the question of “What is man ?”. Because that/this question, in fact, on the one hand historically always *simultaneises* in a being-like way, on the other hand it *opens u*

Well, a dialogue (re)initiated with Heidegger may mean a milestone precisely in this respect. For on the one hand he problematises precisely the “concept” of MAN – radically precisely in the term of *Dasein*, of *Being-here* –,

but on the other hand it does it which such a historical clarity that finally it finds it "providentially" "unsurpassable"...<sup>4</sup> Inasmuch as it proves: it is actually the man who is for Himself always *such* a "problem"... from the thinking over of which he always *escapes* or *turns away* in a mode-of-being-like way...

For this, as I have signalled, it must be proved that the question of "What is man?" is not only a "great idea" of Kant, but one in which he surfaced an essential aspect, which lurks not only in the roots and foundations of the efforts of a philosophy "always" brought to rebirth, but actually in every mode of being in which a historical man *is*.

But let us ask again, whose question the "What is man?" actually is, and whether he, we understand(s) this question – its amplitude and depth – when we search or give hasty "factual" answers to it?

Of course, like any other question, it is "also" a *human question!* For we do not know non-human questions. We cannot even know them, because – if by some miracle we found out about them – they would immediately become human questions.

The question of "What is man?" is a question through which the man – we – inquire about ourselves. More precisely: we inquire about ourselves with our own world.

For man, inquiry is a *mode of being* and not an accidental state in which he occasionally and possibly finds himself. The question of "What is man?", regarding its origins, it nothing more than the self-opening of man's self-problematic nature. For every inquiry is opening, the opening of the questioned – and the inquirer – with regard to its problematic nature. Because the question is only asked by he who is himself questionable, and only thus can anything become questionable for him. So only he can redirect or suppress his questions too.

However, we humans apply the inquiry only in a "logic" of question and answer, due also to our traditions. The quotation marks draw the attention on the fact that questioning does not have a real logic, no matter how many attempts for "correctness" or "rules" there have been for it. Gadamer's words, which claim that there is no method that would teach how to ask a question send us to great depths...

If there is a question – says the traditional man – there must be an answer. We have been formed in our traditions so that we do not want or cannot go without – any kind of, but possibly very fast – answers. And also so that we offer in advance the answers given to the "questions" that have not be re-asked authentically. So that we no longer ask the really uncomfortable, serious questions.

This of course belongs also to the question of "What is man?" with a special emphasis! Somehow we always "know" and receive the answer for it everywhere. Or rather, the all-time surrogates of the answer. The ancient

Greeks also knew that who did not speak Greek, were not really humans, but *barbaros*. Or that a slave is merely a talking tool. The Christian also knows that a non-Christian is actually an infidel. The Muslim too, except that on the other way round. And both of them know that a man without a god (*a-theos*) cannot actually be considered a human... And that all *such people* can only be (our) enemies...

Anthropological researches actually only widen and colour man's horizons connected to his *non-knowing-himself*, to his mistaking himself, which the postmodern today sanctions as narrations with an equal value. Patriarchy also knows that the human is actually a man, and those with a "wider perspective" know that the human equals: a woman and a man, or vice-versa (the so-called "sheman" is not included, of course). And so on!<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, when the man questions himself about himself, about his nature, he somehow already knows the answer from the beginning. Because it is "given" to him, prepared for him by himself. But what else does that mean except that the man always questions and "defines" himself through fake questions?! For a question which already has a prepared answer is of course a fake question. And anthropology – although it is a human mode of being as well – mostly actually asks *How?* does man exist everywhere.

The fake question is the repression, the dilution, the delimitation of the "real", the authentic question in its *definition-like* answers. Because the answers mentioned above – or, more precisely, the apparent definitions – also actually derive from the question of "What is man?". But, with respect to the question: *uncomprehendingly*. We could say that the history of mankind, of man is the history of the unavoidable and uncomprehending, and thus *bequeathed* inquiry (*recte*: answering) of the question "What is man?". So the question itself should not be widened or focussed, but *comprehended!* For we cannot "free ourselves" from inquiring it.

The mortal – and as such, historical – man is a being who is always "problematic" and "problematizing" for himself, that is, an inquisitive-questioning being. This is how he can become a *creating* and world-forming being between other beings. It is therefore not "all the same" either for himself or for the other beings how the man "defines", situates himself amongst them. It is not at all the same for our "environment" whether man understands and validates himself as an empowered "lord" of organic and inorganic nature. And, of course, such a thing has a historical effect on man as well.

But can we – or rather, "may" we – "give" definition-like or solution-like answers to our self-opening and being-opening question "What is man?", while it is precisely anthropology that teaches us about the amazing (sometimes wonderful, sometimes shocking) diversity of human existence? Do we not misunderstand the question itself this way? Or rather its existential weight and ourselves as well?

The information-providing "answers" that seem to offer "solutions" are not enough for questions of existential weight. As I have repeatedly mentioned, we cannot give any practical, non-exclusive and non-reductionist, but truly sustainable answers to the question "What is man?"... Therefore the answers corresponding to question of existential weight we must call *response*! Which *cor-responds* to the essential, permanently thematised *challenges* of the question.

So the human! question of "What is man?" must be given a *response*. Because man asks and validates his own ontological specificity in the question! For it is an essential aspect of man's – the all-time, living, mortal man's – ontological specificity that he is questioning... therefore a permanent "problem" for himself... The question of "What is man?" surfaces this same original and permanent aspect of existential weight. Which is asked not only since Kant, but ever since there has been man and as long as there will be man, explicitly or implicitly, in a being-like and permanent way, uncomprehendingly. And also "answered" and "solved"...

In the depths of uncomprehending lies precisely the non-understanding of the existential weight of the question and questioning. The non-understanding of the fact that it is precisely through it, because of it, and by it that man becomes man! We are who bring-to-life amidst the other beings, amidst our own life/lives.

The most appropriate *response* to the challenges, characteristics and weights of the human question of "What is man?" is and can only be: Man is precisely the being who makes himself, all the other beings and his existence amidst them a *happening* in a way that is questionable for all the "other" man and himself, that is: (mutually) questioning himself.

The corresponding response is therefore not the – necessarily narrowing – "answering" of a question, but "only" its mode-of-being-like, explicit, disclosed re-questioning. This is no "small" thing, but, just like reaching ourselves, it is the most difficult.

But without it... ?

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If we come to think about it more deeply, then we may realize that actually the question "What is man?" is reborn with every new man or generation, in a historically timely way. And, somehow, necessarily, it is also "answered". If in no other way, than with prefabricated, traditional fake "answers". By which the question is always turned in to a face question. Because man does not merely – just like everything that lives – have a finite life, but he is *mortal*. Whether we admit it or not, this is why life has a weight and stake for us as well. Life is weightless for "immortals". Nothing can ever endanger or threaten it. For the other living beings, life is a natural – or

man-created – givenness, changed and outlined by conditions and possibilities. It is born, it grows, changes, develops, then dies. Or gets extinct. But *it does not happen!*

Only for the mortals do their lives have the weight, the difficulty and the stakes of happening. This is why the mortals look at the other beings, the other mortals, to themselves, to their world etc. as *possibilities* (Király 2011, 204) – some that can be used and some as threatening. That is, as possibilities that open up, or close down. And it is precisely why questioning is the *essence of human freedom* (Király 2008, 254). Always and everywhere articulated in a specific manner. That is, in a historical and history-creating manner. Through its particular – authentic, cor-responding or, on the contrary, wrong-going – modes of being.

The achievements of cognition, sciences, arts, technology, the establishment and perfection of religions, institutions, or philosophy itself are all human modes of being which the mortal man, or the questioning-inquisitive historical man builds up and continues as – facilitating or hindering – acceptance of his own existential weights. This way the search for sciences or scientific truths are not sets of curious observations, experiences or theories, but *human modes of being*. Which mankind develops and cultivates through its functionaries called scientists. By the cultivation of natural sciences we humans actually locate ourselves amidst nature, the universe, etc. And precisely so with regard to *possibilities*.<sup>6</sup> Therefore we do not love more the – of course “relative” and historical – truth because it is nicer or more exalted than falseness, but because it is only the truths that can make us humans reveal and outline our (more authentic) possibilities of being. Together with the dangers of things. The situation is the same of course also with human and social sciences.

Thus the original and ultimate establishment of sciences – just like any establishment (based on sufficient motivation) – cannot mean anything else than the clarification of *Why ? Wherefrom ?* do we humans make anything we call (historically ramified) sciences ?! And the question also refers to arts, technology, religions, and institutions and forms of human relationships.

My answer based on my previous meditations and researches to this cluster of questions largely says: Because we are mortals. And because of this – or thanks to this! – we are always actually finite. And not un-delimited and infinite, or dumb “omniscient”... For the case with the omniscient is the same with the immortal. Because an omniscient could only be who knows *without learning/cognition*. It is only he who does *not* know everything who is forced to the dangers and efforts of cognition. More precisely, who always does not know something he would need to know. So he asks questions and searches. And this, for him, also has an existential weight. Therefore, when he finally finds out something with efforts and danger, then he also finds out that ... he KNOWS. In contrast, the “omniscient” may know possibly everything, except the fact that he knows at all. The winding, dangerous,

and usually wonderful, perplexing or shocking road to the knowledge of knowing leads only through the knowledge of not-knowing – *recte*: through inquiry, question, and its explicit questioning. In contrast, one can hardly imagine a *dumber thing* than an “all-knowing”.

These meditations have brought to the surface another new, original and founding aspect. Namely, that the challenging question of *Why?* do we humans actually make, as our modes of being, as particular beings, what we call sciences, arts, technology, religion, institutions and forms of human relationships, can be answered in a way that corresponds to the weight and amplitude of the question in the following way: Because man is precisely the particular being who makes himself, the beings, and his life or being conducted amidst them a *happening* for himself and the “other” beings, questioning himself through the world, in a mode-of-being-like way. This is therefore the most appropriate *response* to the essential question on the *meaning of life*, often forgotten but sometimes still revived by thinkers. Because this question of *Why?* is not *primarily* a causal question or one that refers to the reality of something, but precisely a *meaning-question*, inquiring about the foundations, the roots, and the origins (Király 2009, 115-128).

Because it is revealed that the *human!* meaning-question of Existence, and the also human, meaning-searching and meaning-giving, mode-of-being-like question of “What is man?” actually coincides with respect to their horizon, as well as their amplitude and radicality (depths and roots). For there is being and meaning of being only as long as there is a being (of any kind) who conducts their questioning life in a mode-of-being-like way. In our case: man.

This also proves that the implicit or explicit question of “What is man?” is not any kind of disciplinary or “external” question for us, but an original, particular and foundational being-like and mode-of-being-like human-ontological aspect. Together with mortality understood explicitly in the sense of dying, and historicity deriving from it, (Király 2015, 180) and freedom that articulates historicity. That is, mutually originally. *Recte*: in a co-original way.

One that – we humans – can only face through *philosophy*, while “cultivating” philosophy and understanding its meaning.<sup>7</sup>

As the Motto says with a poetical, dialogical precision: “*Rebirth is easy: my shadow also turns into ashes at times.*”

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So now we know more – that is, understand more authentically – about the question, this time written without quotation marks, of *What is man?* and the weight of its questioning, its stakes and the being-possibilities opened by it. Failures and/or successes...

(Translated by Emese Czintos)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> From the Facebook page of Péter Demény (alias Ivan Karamazov)

<sup>2</sup> It is well-known that Kant's anthropology outlined and published from a "pragmatic" point of view is actually a slightly revised version of his university lectures held under the same name, whose publication caused a considerable disappointment for the audience.

<sup>3</sup> The terms *thematization* and *theme* I use here in the horizon elaborated and "tested" in my own works. In this sense, by *thematization* I mean not a pre-defined circle of things to be analysed, but much rather their *origin* and the particular nature of their philosophical assuming. The "intention" of thematization is in fact that it prompts philosophy to present itself as *actual*, being in *actus*, also in relation to the inevitable subjects it discusses. In the sense of an attempt of *correspondence* to an existential challenge. Therefore the "answer" to a thematising inquiry is always *emancipation*. This way the assuming of a question in the sense of its explicit thematisation always receives the pressure of *urgency*. Because it speaks about something that *pertains to us*, and inevitably burdens us, therefore it cannot be postponed. Our own existential challenges. The "theme" only discloses through thematisation, and only this reveals its inner tensions as well. These of course send to *never* and *never* themes. Therefore the only meditation that can be called "thematization" is the one that, together with its burdening "timeliness", always reaches back to some essential and central moment of "philosophy" and gives new points of view for shedding light on it. Undertaking it in the "living" historical present of philosophising, with regard also to the future. Thematisation is thus characterised by the fact that it is the thematisation of questions beyond the inner automatisms of philosophy, *but that do not lack actuality*. (This is the place to clarify some older etymological meditations on the Greek word *thema*. The centre of its meaning horizons is the thing which is "completed", "finished". But, on the one hand, in such a way that it also carries the process of its completion, and on the other hand, in the sense that it only begins to exist – have an effect, suffer, etc. – once it is completed, once it places itself within its boundaries and outlines (*peras*). I am grateful for my colleague Rigán Lóránd in relation to the meanings of *théma*.

<sup>4</sup> So it gets back to it "by the end".

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that I am talking about theoretical considerations, and this is not the place to discuss the differences between various "images of man" or explicit or implicit "definitions of man", both in its social and ethical dimensions. There are significant differences, of course, for instance between the various images of man of the Islam, and that of the Islamist terrorist organizations. The same is true for Christianity, etc. (I must thank Cecilia Lippai for this insight).

<sup>6</sup> We humans look even at the harshest laws of nature we discovered with regard to the *possibilities* they may offer. Including also the threatening possibilities! E.g., we examine the laws of gravity that keep constellations together precisely with regard to their use and threatening possibilities. Without it, airplanes, spaceships, even house building would be unimaginable. The flow of rivers and streams offers the possibility of sailing and mills, as also the dangers of floods.

<sup>7</sup> This does not mean of course that that question of "What is man?" would be a kind of question only asked at feasts, as a ceremony... or only at times when we have nothing else to do. On the contrary, ever since we have been humans, we have always stood within the – often suppressed, misunderstood – horizons of this question! So that, on the other hand, this question does not refer to any kind of "professional" field of philosophy which the "system" offers as a job for living, but to the existential-ontological origins, roots, foundations – that is, the "Why-s" – of philosophy.

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