

On the Problem of the Distinction Between Man and Animal

I

The central problem of philosophical anthropology is: what is man¹? Most traditional answers to this question attempt to determine the nature of man. What it means to be human depends on an explication of the essential and particular human nature that distinguishes man from animal. The purpose of this chapter is to re-examine the general approach to the problem of human nature and the distinction between man and animal in the Western and the Chinese philosophical traditions with reference to Martin Heidegger's thinking of Being. Based on Heidegger's thought, I would like to show that theories of man in both traditions have focused mostly on the whatness, i.e. the *essentia*, and have thereby overlooked and neglected the "is," i.e. the *existentia* of man. The idea of human existence is a different question from that of human nature. Due to limited space, I shall concentrate only on Aristotle and the Pre-Chin Confucians as the most important exemplars for the discussion of human nature.

Max Scheler, in his *Man's Place in Nature*, maintained that there are three fundamental ideas of man in Western history: man is understood as a rational animal in the Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, as a creature created by God in His image in the Jewish-Christian tradition, and finally as the recent product of animal evolution.² Hence, Western man has been interpreted in the light of three different ideas: the philosophical, the theological and the scientific ideas of man.

¹ I am well aware of the "sexist" connotation of the English word "man." However, I think there is no better alternative for its replacement. "Human being" will be discussed later in the chapter in the light of the Dasein problematic. Hence "man" is used in the chapter throughout in a neutral sense.

² Max Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff, Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, p. 5.

However, Scheler immediately pointed out that these three ideas are not compatible with each other. Among the three, perhaps only the theological idea stresses the complete distinction between man and animal because man is a special being created separately from all other creatures. By contrast, the philosophical and the scientific ideas see man as a species among all living things. Man and animal are only different in degrees. The priority of man over animal is due to some special abilities inherent in man.

In traditional Chinese culture, the dominant ideas of man may be limited to two: the Confucian moral man and the Daoist natural man.³ Of course, there are variations within the Confucian School. The debate over whether the *xing* (性 nature) of man is good, evil or both recurs in the history of Confucianism. For the Daoist, man's true nature belongs to *Dao*. All cultural achievements are seen as a corruption of the *Dao* nature in man. While Confucianism stresses moral awareness as the distinguishing essence in man over against animal, Daoism regards all living things as equal: there is no distinction between man and animal.

Taking the two traditions as a whole, we therefore have two more basic ideas of man to be added to Scheler's list: in addition to the philosophical, the theological and the scientific there is the moral and finally the natural (*Daoist*) man. These ideas cannot all be true since they are incompatible with each other in their fundamental philosophical tenets. There is simply no unified idea of man. This is where Heidegger's critique comes in. Although his "phenomenological destruction" of the metaphysics is only directed to the Western tradition, his critique of the metaphysical basis of the very conception of human nature is, in my opinion, trans-cultural. From the standpoint of *Daseins-analysis*, there is the same mistake in all traditional theories of man: namely, to treat man only as a being (*ein Seiendes*) without any reflection on human existence as such. The Being of the human being is neglected and overlooked. Human nature is considered as an essence (*essentia*), the *differentia* of the species "man." It follows, then, that man is just a being among all beings in the universe, and that the true distinction between man and animal is blurred.

³ See Donald J. Munro, *The Concept of Man in Early China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969.

II

The Greek poet Sophocles, in his tragedy *Antigone*, praised man as the greatest wonder of all things on earth because man's abilities are far superior to those of animals.⁴ He is the master of the earth and lord of all living things. Through his will, nature is subdued to serve the purpose of man. However, most important of all is this:

The use of language, the wind-swift motion of brain he learnt, found out the laws of living together in cities, building him shelter against the rain and wintry weather. There is nothing beyond his power. His subtlety meeteth all chance, all danger conquereth. For every ill he hath found its remedy, save only death. O wondrous subtlety of man, that draws to good or evil ways! Great honour is given and power to him who upholdeth his country's laws and the justice of heaven. But he that, too rashly daring, walks in sin in solitary pride to his life's end. At door of mine shall never enter in to call me friend.⁵

This awesome confidence in man's power was echoed by a similar saying in *Shang-Shu* (尚書), one of the oldest texts in China: "Heaven and earth are parents of all things, whereas man alone is the marvel of all things."⁶

The ancient Greeks, and to a certain extent the Chinese, demonstrated a great confidence in man himself through a reflection of what abilities he had and what achievements he had made. Language and rationality contributed to the establishment of culture and city. At the same time, man was aware of his moral responsibility to the city and his religious obligation to heaven. Hence man distinguished himself from animal just for this self-awareness and for his special abilities. The only limitation of man was his mortality. This pre-philosophical formulation set out the fundamental parameters for all subsequent philosophical reflection on man. The answer to the question of what man is lies in the articulation of the nature, or more precisely the essence of man, so that a distinction can be made between man and animal.

⁴ See Sophocles, *Antigone*, 333ff. in *The Theban Plays*, trans. E. F. Watling, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968, pp. 135-136.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ 《尚書·泰誓上》：「惟天地萬物父母，惟人萬物之靈。」 my translation. Unless otherwise stated, all English translations of the Chinese texts are mine.

III

The Greeks developed the most important idea of man: Man is a rational animal. The thesis that it is human rationality that sets man apart from animal is now commonly understood. This idea originated from Aristotle. The formulation *zoon logon echon*, i.e., Man is the living being who possesses the gift of speech, can be found in at least two places in Aristotle's *Politics*.⁷ However, what Aristotle wants to emphasize in the context of *Politics* is not so much to confine man within the rational capacity, though *logos* in the sense of rationality plays a central role in his theory of the soul and the ethical theory of happiness. In the discussion of the principle of life in *de anima*, Aristotle's aim is to distinguish the living from the non-living. The soul, *psyche*, being the principle for all living things, constitutes five different categories of psychic powers: "the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking."⁸ Based on these five powers, Aristotle proposes a ladder of beings, starting from the lowest type of living beings, like plants, which have only the nutritive soul, to the highest level on the ladder, mankind, who possesses all five powers. However, Aristotle is cautious here not to stress that it is man alone who has this power. He says, "[There is] another order of animate beings, i.e., man and possibly another order like man or superior to him, the power of thinking, i.e., mind."⁹ Man is not the only being with the power to think and reason. The gods should be equally endowed with a rational mind. Rationality is therefore not the only essential characteristic determining human nature. When the formulation *zoon logon echon* was later translated by the Roman Stoic Seneca into "*Rationale enim animal est homo*"—a dictum of man equating *logos* with *ratio*—the full meaning of *logos* was narrowed down to mere reason.¹⁰

⁷ The formulation "*zoon logon echon*" is not exactly Aristotle's. In *Politics* 1253a 9-10 we read: "Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal who has the gift of speech." And in 1332b 5: "Man has reason, in addition, and man alone." Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. B. Jowett, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton, CT: Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 1988 and 2114.

⁸ Aristotle, *de anima*, 414b 30, trans. J.A. Smith, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 414b 17-20.

¹⁰ "Man is a rational animal" is a translation of the Latin "*Rationale enim animal est homo*" from Seneca, *L. Annaei Senecae ad Lucilium epistulae morales. Recognovit et adnotatione critica instruxit*. L.D. Reynolds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965. Ep. 41, 8. Quoted in Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, *Wege ins Ereignis*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994, p. 332.

According to Aristotle, *logos* means more than reason.¹¹ More primordial than reason is the ability of speech. In addition, *logos* alone does not exhaust the nature of man. Man is also by nature a *zoon politikon*—a political animal.¹² Therefore, it is clear that Aristotle does not simply take *zoon logistikon* as the only defining characteristic of man. Combining these two insights, Aristotle says:

And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals, *the power of speech is intended to set forth* the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is *a characteristic of man that he alone* has any sense of good and evil, or just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.¹³ (my emphasis)

This is one of the most important insights into human nature. Aristotle obviously follows Sophocles's idea about the greatness of man in *Antigone*. Man's rational ability alone does not make man as man. The creation of communal living within a *polis* and the moral awareness of goodness and justice are the conditions of the possibility of human existence and in turn are the determination of human nature as such. Echoing Sophocles once again, Aristotle condemns solitary man. He says: "But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god; he is no part of a state. A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature, and yet he who first found the state was the greatest benefactor."¹⁴

The difference between man and animal does not simply lie in the two facts that man has one more psychic power than animal and that man can form society. Some species of animal, according to modern animal biology, can form a certain kind of society, and it is evident that social structure and behavioral rules exist in the animal community.

¹¹ W.K.C. Guthrie enumerates eleven common meanings of *logos* in the 5th-century Greek world, among them, reason or argument, speech, measure, general principle and truth. See his *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp. 419-424.

¹² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a 2-3: "Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal." *op. cit.*, p. 1987.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1253a 18-19, p. 1988.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1253a 28-31.

Ants and bees are clearly examples for such animal communities. The most fundamental distinction is not just reason alone but the power to *set forth* through language, i.e., to “reveal,” to “declare,”¹⁵ what is good and just. The power of articulation through language is therefore most essential to the concept of *logos*. Because of this power, says Aristotle, it is evident “that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animal.”¹⁶

On the other hand, *Logos* in the sense of reason is surely an essential characteristic of man. Although man and animal share similar physical and psychical dispositions, it is only man who can change these dispositions according to the demand of reason. Aristotle explains:

Animals lead for the most part a life of nature, although in lesser particulars some are influenced by habit as well. Man has reason, in addition, and man only. For this reason nature, habit, reason must be in harmony with one another; for they do not always agree; men do many things against habit and nature, if reason persuades them that they ought to.¹⁷

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, rationality is the determining factor for the idea of happiness in man. “If happiness is activity in accordance with excellence, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the high excellence; and this will be that of the best thing in us.”¹⁸ It is obvious that the best thing in man is *logos*, interpreted here as the intellect. It follows that the best activity, according to man’s excellence, is intellectual contemplation. Aristotle says, “[T]hat which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since

¹⁵ While Jowett translates the Greek into “the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient [...],” Carns Lord renders it as “But speech serves to reveal the advantageous and the harmful, and hence the just and the unjust” in Aristotle: *The Politics*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984, p. 37; likewise, Ernest Barker: “But language serves to declare what is advantageous and what is the reverse, and it therefore serves to declare what is just and unjust” in *The Politics of Aristotle*, London: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1253a 7-9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1332b 4-9

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177a 12-14. trans. W.D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, *op. cit.*, p. 1860.

intellect more than anything else *is* man. This life therefore is also the happiest.”¹⁹

Logos means more than the ontological concept in defining human nature here; it is also the *telos* of man. The actualization of *logos* is the value and the end for man. However, Aristotle does not think this intellectual actualization is a purely contemplative activity. Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not believe in the realm of the pure *eidōs*. In *Phaedo*, Plato suggests that the true and complete life is the one that is purified by philosophy so that the soul can leave the evil body and enter into the realm of the *eidōs*. True happiness can only be achieved by attaining immortality of the soul. For Aristotle, complete happiness remains only as an ideal because “such a life would be too high for man.”²⁰ Man cannot exist in a pure contemplative life. Such life belongs only to god. A concrete man is a composite of body and soul. It is no longer human life when the soul breaks off from the body. In fact, Aristotle does not think the soul can exist alone. To him, the soul is the principle of life and does not have separate ontological status. Hence Aristotle was extremely skeptical of the idea of the immortality of the soul.²¹ Human life is above all “political” life. Aristotle says, “[B]ut in so far as he is a man and lives with a number of people, he chooses to do virtuous acts; he will therefore need such aids to living a human life.”²² This is the reason for Aristotle to list all the “external” and “social” conditions for human happiness. Man needs health, wealth, friendship, etc., moderated by practical wisdom, in order to lead a concrete happy life.²³

From the above discussion it is clear that man cannot be understood solely as an animal with reason. The traditional idea of man as a rational animal is only a part of Aristotle’s idea of man as *zōon logistikōn*. Indeed, *logos*, in the sense of reason and speech, constitutes

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1178a 5-8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1177b 27.

²¹ In *de anima* Book III, Aristotle discusses the active and passive functions of the mind. He says (430a 23-26): “When mind is set free from its present conditions it appears as just what it is and nothing more: this alone is immortal and eternal (we do not, however, remember its former activity because, while mind in this sense is impossible, mind as passive is destructible), and without it nothing thinks.” Aristotle did not elaborate any further about this “immortal” part of the soul. In any case, this plays little role in concrete human life.

²² *Ibid.*, 1178b 5-7.

²³ See *ibid.*, Book X, chapters 8 and 9.

human nature, which sets him apart from animal. However, the gods, too, possess *logos*. Hence it is important to understand the meaning of man as *zoon politikon*. For here lies the distinction between man and the gods, between the mortal and the immortal. The political nature of man means not so much as the essence in man that requires actualization—it is rather the condition for human existence. Man exists only in a community formed with others. No man exists alone, but the gods can. On the other hand, through the power of speech and reason, man can articulate moral awareness and legal obligation. Such is the distinction between man and animal.

IV

There are striking similarities between the ideas of man in Aristotle and Confucianism, and such similarities are not so much in content but in methodology. It is obvious that the central idea in Confucianism is the primacy of moral consciousness, which is the distinguishing characteristic of man as opposed to animal. The debate between Mencius and Xunzi on whether the human nature is good or evil is not an important issue in this chapter. The present concern is to understand how human nature and human existence are understood in Confucianism.

In *On the Regulations of a King* 〈王制〉 Xunzi explains the difference between man and other beings in a sense parallel to Aristotle's formulation in *De anima* and *Politics*. Xunzi says:

Fire and water possess vital breath (*qi* 氣) but have no life (*sheng* 生). Plants and trees possess life but lack awareness (*zhi* 知). Birds and beasts have awareness, but lack a sense of morality and justice (*yi* 義). Humans possess vital breath, life, and awareness, and add to them a sense of morality and justice. It is for this reason that they are the noblest beings in the world. In physical power they are not so good as an ox, in swiftness they do not equal the horse; yet the ox and horse can be put to their use. Why is that? I say it is because humans alone can form societies and animals cannot. Why can man form a society? I say it is due to the division of society into classes. How can social divisions be translated into behavior? I say it is because of humans' sense of morality and justice. Thus, if their sense of morality and justice is used to divide society into classes,

concord will result. [...] Accordingly, from birth all men are capable of forming societies.²⁴

Hence Xunzi believes in a ladder of beings. The four classes of beings, the non-living and the three different kinds of living beings, share the most basic material constituent, *qi*. Within the living beings, there is a gradation of essences, namely, life *sheng*, awareness *zhi*, and moral awareness *yi*. Only man has all the essences and exclusively possesses the capacity of moral awareness, which distinguishes him from all other beings and enables him to become the noblest of all. Aristotle would agree with Xunzi in his classification of beings. Both philosophers place man along the continuum of beings. Man is nothing but an animal plus one special essence that is absent from all other beings. For Aristotle, the essence is *logos*, and for Xunzi, moral awareness, *yi*. These two philosophers have one more point in common: man is by nature a “political” being. Another great Confucian before Xunzi, Mencius, apparently holds similar view:

Slight is the difference between man and the brutes. The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while the gentleman retains it, Shun understood the way of things and had a keen insight into human relationships. He followed the path of morality. He did not just put morality into practice.²⁵

However, Mencius is not satisfied with only the ontological status of moral awareness. The mere presence of it does not qualify a man to be a man, if this awareness does not actualize itself into practice. There is a distinction between man and animal, as well as between the common man and the gentleman. When the common man does not realize and actualize his inherent power of morality, he is no more than an animal. When Mencius asserts that human nature is good, he surely does not mean that man is by nature good in actuality, but only that

²⁴ *Xunzi*, trans. John Knoblock, vol. II, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 103-104. 荀子〈王制〉：「水火有氣而無生，草木有生而無知，禽獸有知而無義；人有氣、有生、有知亦且有義，故最為天下貴也。力不若牛，走不若馬，而牛馬為用，何也？曰：人能群，彼不能群也。人何以能群？曰：分。分何以能行？曰：義。故義以分則和……故人生不能無群。」

²⁵ *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1984, p. 165. 孟子〈離婁下〉：「孟子曰：『人之所以異於禽獸者幾希，庶民去之，君子存之。舜明於庶物，察於人倫，由仁義行，非行仁義也。』」

man has the capacity to be good. Furthermore, the actualization of this capacity does not come out in a “natural” way. It requires the will of the man, through this moral capacity, for the act of self-transformation from common man to gentleman. The famous debate between Mencius and Kaozi over the idea of human nature leads to the establishment of the “four germs” (四端) as the distinguishing characteristics of being human. Mencius says:

The heart of compassion is possessed by all men alike; likewise the heart of shame, the heart of respect, and the heart of right and wrong. The heart of compassion pertains to benevolence, the heart of shame to dutifulness, the heart of respect to the observance of the rites, and the heart of right and wrong to wisdom. Benevolence, dutifulness, observance of the rites, and wisdom do not give me a lustre from the outside, they are in me originally. Only this has never dawned on me. This is why it is said, “Seek and you will find it; let go and you will lose it.”²⁶

In another chapter Mencius employs the presence and the actualization of these four germs as the criteria to distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic man. Whoever is devoid of the hearts of compassion, shame, courtesy, modesty, and finally right and wrong is not human. “For a man possessing these four germs to deny his own potentialities is for him to cripple himself. [...] When these are fully developed, he can tend the whole realm within the Four Seas, but if he fails to develop them, he will not be able even to serve his parents.”²⁷ Without actualization of the four hearts, man cannot be called man and remains at the level of the animals.

This is indeed a great demand on man. Mencius is clearly not just interested in distinguishing man from animal as a distinct species. More so he wants to stress the moral perfectibility of man. Mencius’ idea of man is an ontological as well as axiological concept. The destiny of man lies in the full realization of his moral capacity. Therefore he says:

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 229. 孟子〈告子上〉：「惻隱之心，人皆有之；羞惡之心，人皆有之；恭敬之心，人皆有之；是非之心，人皆有之。惻隱之心，仁也；羞惡之心，義也；恭敬之心，禮也；是非之心，智也。仁義禮智，非由外鑠我也，我固有之也，弗思耳矣。故曰，『求則得之，舍則失之。』。」

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-69. 〈公孫丑上〉：「有是四端而自謂不能者，自賊者也……苟能充之，足以保四海；苟不充之，不足以事父母。」

For a man to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven. By retaining his heart and nurturing his nature he is serving Heaven. Whether he is going to die young or to live a ripe old age makes no difference to his steadfastness of purpose. It is through awaiting whatever is to befall him with a perfected character that he stands firm on his proper Destiny.²⁸

Apparently, Aristotle's idea of happiness comes closer to Mencius's. Happiness lies in the full actualization of the activities of the soul according to the intellect, though Aristotle is quick to point out that perfect happiness is too high for the mortal to realize. Mencius on the other hand suggests that the perfect moral self-transformation is possible for man only if he realizes completely what he already has inside himself. Human nature is not an ontological descriptive term but a moral task unto man himself. The distinction between man and animal is not ontologically defined but rests on the will of man who transforms and transcends the animal nature inside himself.

V

So far I have elucidated the idea of human nature and the distinction between man and animal in Aristotle and the two great Confucians. The problem now is: Is the human nature so clearly articulated in the two traditions that the "essence" of human "being" can be understood? If man is a rational animal, then reason is the essence of man. If man is a moral animal, then morality is his essence. Nearly all subsequent theories of human nature in both traditions were worked out in this direction: to investigate into the kind of special abilities or characters purportedly found only in man and not in animals and so to identify the "essence" of man. The Christian concept of man focuses on the particular meaning of *spiritus*, with which man enjoys a unique status in the cosmos. Only man has this special gift from the Creator; therefore, man does not entirely belong to the animal kingdom. Darwin's evolutionism later contradicted this, stressing that there is no genuine distinction between man and animal. As such there is no special and permanent human nature. What man is is only the product of the evolutionary

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 265. 〈盡心上〉：「盡其心者，知其性也。知其性，則知天矣。存其心，養其性，所以事天也。殀壽不貳，脩身以俟之，所以立命也。」

process. The Marxist, on the other hand, regards economic production as the only criterion to determine human nature.²⁹ The re-definition by Cassirer of man as an *animal symbolicum* in place of *animal rationale* is but another excellent example of the extension of the meaning of *logos* into the realm of language and cultural forms.³⁰ There are indeed many more theories of man not only within philosophy but also in modern social sciences. In contrast to the *speculative* ideas in philosophy, sociology, psychology and anthropology all propose different *empirical* theories of man. The modern discipline of philosophical anthropology is devoted to the synthesis of speculative and empirical theories.³¹ The arguments between all these theories of human nature seem to rest on the justification of the primordially of the human *essence* in question.

The present diversified understanding of man is clearly more chaotic than what Max Scheler said earlier in this chapter about the three ideas of Western man. Scheler's solution in *Man's Place in Nature* is to propose the concepts of person and spirit in contrast to all other theories of man. "Spirit" according to him is not "a new essential form of being added to the previous stages of psychic life—the vital impulse, instinct, associative memory, intelligence and choice."³² Scheler explains the meaning of spirit and person:

"Spirit"—a term which includes the concept of reason, but which, in addition to conceptual thought, also includes the intuition of essences and a class of voluntary and emotional acts such as kindness, love, remorse, reverence, wonder, bliss, despair and free decision. The center of action in which spirit appears within a finite mode of being we call "person" [...].³³

However, the inclusion of every essential capacity of man into spirit only turns this new term into a collection of essences, or better,

²⁹ For recent works on human nature, see Peter Loftson, *Theories of Human Nature*, Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1995; and Roger Trigg, *Ideas of Human Nature*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.

³⁰ See Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944, esp. Chapters I & II.

³¹ See James J. Dagenais, *Models of Man*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972. Dagenais enumerates the following models: the psychological, the holistic, the psychoanalytic, the sociological, the Marxist and the structuralist models of man.

³² Max Scheler, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

³³ *Ibid.*

the essence of all essences. According to the idea of spirit, the Aristotelian *Logos* might fuse with the Confucian idea of the “four germs” and could become a more comprehensive theory of man. If such is the case, then spirit is still considered as a kind of human nature, because through this, man once again re-confirms his unique status among all living beings. Scheler’s idea is only one more theory of man added to the long list. There is still no unified theory of man.

In this regard, Heidegger’s insight into this problem is particularly critical. He spells out the futility of the approaches in defining man through essence or nature. In his *Letter on Humanism*, he questions:

Are we really on the right track toward the essence of man as long as we set him off as one living creature among others in contrast to plants, beasts, and God? We can proceed in that way; we can in such fashion locate man within being as one being among others. We will thereby always be able to state something correct about man. But we must be clear on this point, that when we do this we abandon man to the essential realm of *animalitas* even if we do not equate him with beasts but attribute a specific difference to him.³⁴

The problem for all theories of human nature is therefore a metaphysical one. Human nature is regarded in terms of the metaphysical schema of *essentia* and *existentia*. So is the nature of plants, animals, and even God is conceptualized in this way. The distinction between the nature of man, plants, animals and God is in the end a matter of difference only in quality. Man is considered as an objective being, a presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenes*), at the ontological level shared with all other beings. Heidegger continues:

In principle we are still thinking of *homo animalis*—even when *anima* (soul) is posited as *animus sive mens* (spirit or mind), and this in turn is later posited as subject, person, or spirit (*Geist*). Such positing is the manner of metaphysics. But then the essence of man is too little heeded and not thought in its origin, the essential provenance that is always the essential future for historical mankind.³⁵

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, trans. Frank A Capuzzi, in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, New York: Harper and Row, 1977, p. 203.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

The reason for Heidegger to write *Letter on Humanism* was to answer the question on the meaning of humanism raised by his French friend, Jean Beaufret, in connection to Jean-Paul Sartre's definition of man in the light of Existentialism. For Sartre, there is no objectively definable "human nature" in man. In complete objection to traditional essentialism Sartre concludes that man cannot be defined by any pre-conceived essence. Man can only be understood in his action. In Sartre's words: "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards."³⁶ Hence the dictum: *Existence precedes essence*. Here Sartre proclaims his apparent alliance to Heidegger, saying that he and Heidegger share the same atheistic attitude and believe that "*existence comes before essence*."³⁷ Heidegger clearly rejects this interpretation. His understanding of *existence* and *essence* in the light of the thinking of Being has nothing in common with Sartre's existentialism.³⁸ Sartre simply misread what Heidegger had written in Chapter 9 of *Being and Time*: "The 'essence' (*Wesen*) of Dasein lies in its existence (*Existenz*)."³⁹

Heidegger's thinking of Dasein is in fact a completely different approach to the problem of the Being of man. His formulation of the classical question of what man is in *Letter on Humanism* is highly illustrative of his thinking of Being. He says:

What man is—or, as it is called in the traditional language of metaphysics, the "essence" of man—lies in his ek-sistence. But ek-sistence thought in this way is not identical with the traditional concept of *existentia*, which means actuality in contrast to the meaning of *essentia* as possibility. In *Being and Time* this sentence is italicized: "The 'essence' of Dasein lies in its existence." [...] The sentence says: man occurs essentially (west) in such a way that he is the "there" (das "Da"), that is, the lighting (*Lichtung*) of Being. The "Being" of the Da, and only it, has the fundamental character of ek-sistence, that is, of an

³⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet, London: Methuen, 1948, p. 28.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26

³⁸ "Sartre reverses this statement. But the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement. With it he stays with metaphysics in oblivion of the truth of Being." Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism. op. cit.*, p. 208.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, p. 67.

ecstatic inherence in the truth of Being. The ecstatic essence of man consists in ek-sistence, which is different from the metaphysically conceived *existentia*.⁴⁰

Obviously it is far beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the full meaning of the above passage. The explication of the meaning of Dasein, which is the major task of the whole published work of *Being and Time*, is only a preparatory step towards the thinking of Being. For Heidegger, the key problem of man is not to investigate the possible properties and special capacities of the so-called “human nature” empirically or metaphysically; the major issue is to understand what human *being* is. Any metaphysical distinction of man drawn from a comparison between man and animal does not really think of man as man in his Being. “Metaphysics thinks of man on the basis of *animalitas* and does not think in the direction of his *humanitas*.”⁴¹ The *essentia* (Wesen) of man does not point to the *substantia*, the whatness, in man. “Wesen” means the disclosing process of the understanding of Being (*Seinsverständnis*) in the human Dasein. “Wesen”—essence—in this sense refers not to the what but to the how of Dasein with respect to its “existence.”⁴²

VI

The purpose of this chapter is an attempt to re-think the problem of human nature as the key for the distinction of man from animal. The discussion on Aristotle’s dual idea of *zoon logistikon* and *zoon politikon* aims to question the traditional conception of man as *animal rationale*: that human nature is narrowed down to the idea of reason, and so the rich content of *logos* is neglected, and, at the same time, the meaning of human existence pertaining to the idea of *zoon politikon* is undermined. The comparison of Aristotle with Xunzi and with Mencius is to show the similarity of their approaches to the question of man, though the two great Confucians place the primacy of the human nature on moral

⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁴² Due to limited space it is impossible to explain fully the meaning of Dasein, Wesen and Existenz here. For a preliminary clarification see my article in Chinese: “Hermeneutics and Dasein: the Hermeneutical Phenomenology in Early Heidegger” 〈詮釋與此在：早期海德格之詮釋現象學〉 in *The Phenomenological and Philosophical Research in China* 2: 1998, pp. 212-214.

awareness and its actualization. These two ideas from Aristotle and the Confucians have been the most important for all subsequent theories of man. Heidegger's philosophy has changed all these. The distinction of man from animal should not be sought in human nature but in the meaning of human existence in the light of Being.