

## Latin American Perspectives on Religion

Agnaldo Portugal\*

# Henrique Vaz, Darwin and Cassirer: Being Human and Transcendence

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**Abstract:** This article compares the approach of the Brazilian philosopher Henrique Vaz to the ones of Charles Darwin and Ernst Cassirer about human nature. Firstly, the text expounds Darwin's ideas about human species in his *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), showing how the strictly biological approach is insightful in many respects, but becomes insufficient to understand humans in some other important points. Secondly, the article argues that those insufficiencies of Darwin's theory may be overcome by the culture centered understanding of the human phenomenon held by Ernst Cassirer. Some other inadequacies are shown in Cassirer's account, however, which can be resolved – preserving the virtues of both his and Darwin's theories – by Henrique Vaz's dialectic conception of humans as beings towards transcendence.

**Keywords:** human nature; biological anthropology; culture; concept of person

## 1 Introduction

Henrique Claudio de Lima Vaz was born in 1921 in Ouro Preto, a Brazilian city founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the Portuguese, when they finally discovered gold in their American colony. Henrique Vaz was a Jesuit priest, and taught not only in catholic seminaries but also at the Minas Gerais State Federal University, one of the most prestigious in the country, where he earned the title of Professor Emeritus. “Father Vaz”, as he was affectionately dubbed, had surely a remarkable philosophical erudition, but more than that: he was able to engage in a critical dialogue with the many authors he read. By the time of his death, in 2002, he was recognized by most members of the Brazilian philosophical community as a true philosopher.

The roots of his thought are mainly, but not only, in Plato, Aquinas and Hegel, emerging from them in an intriguing and original synthesis. Despite this mostly classic source, his works (thirteen books published so far, as well as dozens of articles, apart from an enormous number of unpublished papers, which are planned to come out in the next years) dialogue actively with modern and contemporary philosophy. Henrique Vaz was then a Brazilian philosopher, who wrote mainly in Portuguese and reflected on philosophical questions from his particular situation, but in a consistent debate with the most known thinkers and schools of thought of the international academic community.

However, he is still very little known outside Brazil, and perhaps even among Brazilian new philosophers. In this text I aim to provide an example of Vaz's contribution to general philosophical thought by means of a comparison of his ideas regarding human nature with the theses put forward by two major intellectual figures: Charles Darwin and Ernest Cassirer. We will first see the way Darwin understood what amounts to being human according to his main work in this subject: *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), where he applied his theory of evolution by means of natural selection to our species. From this mostly biological approach, we move to Ernest Cassirer's thesis of man as a “symbolic animal”, as

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\*Corresponding author: Agnaldo Portugal, University of Brasília, Brazil; E-mail: agnaldocp@unb.br

a way to overcome some deficiencies observed in Darwin's approach. As Cassirer's proposal also reveals to be problematic, we will see in Henrique Vaz's philosophical anthropology an insightful option for a comprehensive understanding of this complex matter.

## 2 Charles Darwin and man as a biological being

Despite the fact that Darwin was not a philosopher, his conception about human nature from the point of view of his research in evolutionary biology is a good starting point to understand this highly complicated issue. Darwin's approach captures a very intuitive idea about human identity. Let me illustrate this point with a hypothetical situation. Imagine you are in an expedition of the Brazilian National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples in an isolated area of the immense Amazon forest. In a given moment, you and your companions come to believe that you spotted a human individual. What does take you to that conclusion at first? Very probably the reason why you believe you saw a human being is his physical appearance, which is peculiar to the human species. In other words, the familiar intuition that justifies the choice of the biological approach to the human being as a starting point to formulate its corresponding concept is that it talks about us in view of something that is immediately evident right in the first contact: the fact that we have a body with some identifiable features.

The human body is exactly Darwin's starting point in *The Descent of Man*. One of his main intents was to show that we have nothing really exceptional regarding other animal species, considering the way our body and other traces that characterize us have been originated in nature. Like the other biological kinds, humans are the result of differentiation mechanisms exactly equal to the ones that allowed to the emergence of all species in the biological realm. Darwin called this mechanism natural selection, by means of which a species develops from a set of traits that are best adapted to the environment its members inhabits. This adaptation provides individuals with advantages that ascribes them a higher probability of surviving and leaving descendants. For Darwin, that which makes humans what they are may be described by a natural process of selection of the most apt to a particular environment among a huge population of individuals, given a particularly long period of time.

If we are really submitted to a process that is the same as the one endured by other animals, one may expect that our most typical characteristics be shown in a certain degree in other species as well. This would confirm our unequivocal belonging to natural world. And what we have in *The Descent of Man* is an impressive succession of arguments to this resemblance of man with other species, not only in physical terms, but also in what he calls moral and intellectual faculties. The upright posture, the head bigger than almost all the other species in proportion to their respective bodies, a body practically destitute of hair, a hand with opposition thumb as all other primates, but capable of meticulous and well-coordinated activities in handling instruments, these are the most evident body features of human species. Obviously enough, physical characteristics are too little to describe humans. Following the Aristotelian double pattern for describing human beings as animals that are both rational and political, Darwin complements his physical account with a description of the mental and behavior faculties, which make us a peculiar species.

By mental faculties, Darwin means events, states and actions such as feeling, desiring, believing, intending and thinking. For him, one cannot deny that the possession of faculties like those ones in a sophisticated and complex degree is something that distinguishes us. However, he strives to show – with great success – that each such faculty, including abstraction, reasoning and purposive action are found in other animal species. This means that having those faculties is not a qualitative distinction of human species, but rather a difference in degree only. If it is only a matter of degree, then it is very probable that factors such as our rationality and capacity of acting purposefully have been traces developed naturally, following natural selection mechanisms.

As regards moral or practical faculties, related not to knowledge, but to behavior, Darwin follows a similar path, yet draws a slightly different conclusion. In biological terms, our species is just another one in which individuals need the group to develop themselves according to the species features. Darwin proposes that, as among other gregarious species, there is in the human kind two basic instincts that are related to each other

in various manners. On the one hand, humans have a self-preservation instinct, by which they search for keeping themselves alive and for leaving descendants. On the other hand, there is a social instinct, by which an individual dedicates to other members of the species, sometimes putting his own life at risk.

Darwin understands that, in the case of humans, the social instinct evolves in several ways, particularly through habit and education, so that the individualistic instinct of self-preservation slowly gets mitigated and controlled. This control of the egoistic instinct would be a trait probably acquired by natural selection too, since the strengthening of the group is an important comparative advantage to the preservation of each individual's life. So far, nothing very different from other species, since birds, for example, also seem to combine the instinct of taking care of young offspring and the urge for migrating in certain periods of the year, so that it also looks to be adaptively influenced by habit. Still, in the case of humans, a distinctively unique element is manifest.

According to Darwin, apart from the social instinct, from the cost-benefit calculation involved in altruistic actions (“it is good that I help my neighbor today, so that he can help me tomorrow”) and from habit, which automates certain actions that may benefit others, human beings are equipped with another item related to practical faculties. Our species is characterized by something he calls “moral sense”:

I fully subscribe to the judgement of those writers who maintain that of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important... It is the most noble of all the attributes of man, leading him without a moment's hesitation to risk his life for that of a fellow-creature; or after due deliberation, impelled simply by the deep feeling of right or duty, to sacrifice it in some great cause<sup>1</sup>.

Moral sense is the capability of evaluating an action according to values of good and bad, whose content may vary in history and across the cultures, but that can be taken as a distinctive quality of our species. Darwin thought that the moral evaluation of our actions could have little immediate effect in our behavior, but was something universal and apparently inevitable among human beings. On the other hand, when it classifies an action as good or bad, moral sense can determine the course of actions by means of habit and education, either automating new forms of instantaneous acting or performing (or avoiding) them through conscious decision.

No matter how controversial may be the Darwinian thesis that we are distinguished by the possession of a moral sense, this idea plays a crucial role in a problem that comes up at Chapter 5 of the *Descent of Man*, when he inquires to which extent natural selection still “affects civilized nations”. The problem can be put the following way. One of the non-mentioned distinctive features of our species is its wide geographic distribution, being able to inhabit all important terrestrial ecologic niches. According to Darwin, this is thanks to the sophistication of our mental qualities and the possibilities allowed by sociability regarding work division, which enabled us to mold different types of environment to our needs. This means that, more than any other species (and this is also a matter of degree only), we can in large measure adapt the world to us, instead of having to adapt ourselves to natural demands.

From a moral point of view, the question is about the mechanisms and strategies for looking after the most vulnerable people in those more complex societies. Darwin takes great pains to show that this does not mean that natural selection stops acting in the case of humans. The problem is that, the more complex is the material culture in these societies, the more humanized is nature in which humans inhabit. In other words, the type of natural selection to which we are submitted is much less biological and much more the fruit of social intention. For Darwin, contrary to some voices in his time, it would be an absurd to leave the most vulnerable perish because of an alleged progress of the species according to natural selection.

The aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy, which was originally acquired as part of the social instincts, but subsequently rendered, in the manner previously indicated, more tender and more widely diffused. Nor could we check our sympathy, even at the urging of hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 98.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 136.

In other words, although niche creation is something widely spread in the animal kingdom, in our species it implies the replacement of more direct natural factors by what we could call “cultural influences”. In the sense of learning new behavior that is taught to new generations, culture is not something unique to humans some say today<sup>3</sup>, but it surely plays a role of crucial importance among us. It is not only in the innovation that is implied in the sense of culture indicated above that we can see in it another sort of influence working on human species, but also in the sense that it is the product of purposeful initiative, and of not being directly linked to adaptive advantage aimed at survival. Darwin wanted to explain why we have in human societies such a variety of behaviors and artifacts that seem so little related to immediate survival. Human cultures are widely different in many aspects: would this be connected to an element also found in the animal kingdom?

In Darwin’s answer to this problem there was an explanation for an intriguing objection to his theory of evolution by means of natural selection, namely, many important anatomic structures in the biological world do not seem to be useful for survival. Rather, cases as the famous example of the peacock tail indicated traces that were not only little useful, but that became the individuals more vulnerable to their predator. The bigger is the peacock tail, the more difficult it is for it to flee from its hunters. For Darwin, the explanation for this problem is also the answer for the origin of culture. In addition to the natural selection of qualities that were useful to survival, the origin and diversification of species was explainable according to another principle equally important: sexual selection. In this one, the criterion is not utility in view of the environment, but a pattern of value that is applied in the interaction between females and males in the mating process. The bigger is the tail of the male peacock, the higher is its chance of being chosen by the females, defeating its rivals in this process.

Darwin thought this process was common to all animal species which used the sexual method of reproduction, and that this would be responsible for characters apparently useless and costly in energy terms such as the color of the feathers and the sing of the birds. In the human case, sexual selection would be in the origin of features that have little or nothing to do with adaptation to the environment for survival, such as the skin color, the type of hair, the diversity and complexity of verbal language, apart from human universal activities like chant, dance and ornamentation. Racial differences and cultural complexity of the human single biological species would be a result of sexual selection.

However, as in natural selection, the origin seemed to have little influence in the posterior development of culture. As with human natural selection, that occurs partly in a nature created by humans and follows values that are not only the ones of the survival for the fittest, sexual selection seems to have originated results and processes that became autonomous in relation to its probable starting point. After all, it seems improbable that sciences like abstract algebra and evolutionary biology, and activities like religious cults and artistic painting had much to do with the goal of attracting the opposite sex and beating the rivals. Human cultures were even able to redefining the relationship between the sexes, submitting them to the much broader concept of “gender”.

In sum, the Darwinian comprehension of the human being has the merit of starting from something that is very evident and familiar and from this to be able to understand being human in some of its most distinguishing aspects. However, the way his own reasoning unfolds seems to show the limits of his approach: human beings are certainly natural entities, which is explainable in physical and biological terms, but they are also much more than this. So, let us then move on to another step.

### 3 Ernest Cassirer and human nature as a cultural entity

In the route I am proposing here for clarifying the concept of being human, Cassirer’s classical book *An Essay on Man* (1944) plays the role of an intermediary between Darwin and Vaz. The German neo-Kantian can be taken to be starting exactly from the point where the Darwinian explanation found its limit: the relative autonomy of (complex) culture development as a characteristic element of humans.

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<sup>3</sup> For an interesting debate about it, see Laland & Galef, *The Question of Animal Culture*.

Cassirer proposes an amplification of the Aristotelian concept of man as a rational animal. For him, in addition to theoretical and argumentative reason, we are distinguished by the capability of creating and using symbols in an appropriate way. In this activity, not only reasoning and arguments are involved, but also emotions and passions. These ones are part of propositional language, which only human beings are capable of. Verbal language is not only a reactive adaptation to the world, even if its origin may lie in this. That kind of language is distinguished by the fact that it refers to things and events in an abstract and variable way, and with a broad scope of applicability. This means that we apply words to things, and these names do not have anything to do with the corresponding things (that is why the language is abstract), they may be expressed in many ways or even in a same language on different senses in various contexts of applicability. For this reason, Cassirer understands that we should better comprehend the human being as a symbolic animal:

Reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man's cultural life in all their richness and variety. But all these forms are symbolic forms. Hence, instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*.<sup>4</sup>

For Cassirer, the capacity of symbolizing and living in a symbolic reality would be an element that distinguishes humans. It is this very ability that permits that men create not only language, but also, myth, religion, art and science. It is to the whole of these human symbolic forms that Cassirer calls "culture". And being culture the distinctive feature that sorts humans from other animals, Cassirer understands that the question "what is being human?" corresponds to "what is culture?"

Each of the human symbolic forms has its own history and related subject matter. However, Cassirer identifies three main peculiarities of human culture that constitute the core of his philosophical anthropology. Firstly, he thinks that culture is characterized by a process of abstraction in relation to the material element that it refers to. Geometric representation is an example of this: the further it has become from concrete space, the more it has opened to us the possibility of understanding and dealing with tangible things. Secondly, and as a counterpart to abstraction, culture expresses the increasing human autonomy regarding nature. According to Cassirer:

Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases in this process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new power – the power to build up a world of his own, an "ideal" world.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, in a consideration that only comes up at the concluding chapter, Cassirer argues that culture is distinguished by a dialectics between conservation and rupture, manifested in each of its main symbolic forms. This means that, for him, the unity of these cultural forms constitutes a combination of opposites. In language, for instance, there is the trend to conservation of grammatical rules and vocabulary, in order to allow for communication and the expression of objects and events, but there is also the tendency to change and renovation, exactly for the same reason.

Cassirer's effort is really praiseworthy. However, even if his philosophy of culture is right as to the elements that characterize the structure of symbolic forms that give them unity, a point seems to make his approach highly unsatisfactory. Even if we cannot deny that humans are culture maker animals, this is only part of the answer to the question about what it is like to be human. Since culture is only what humans produce, comprehending them based on it is to confuse the product with the producer. Although the former speaks a lot about the latter, it certainly only allows to see it in relation to the product they have made. Particularly, we are left without a concept that helps us to understand human beings not only from a social point of view, but also as individuals. After all, Joanne is a human being, but she is not culture. If we explain culture, we can even understand part of what Joanne is like, but this certainly will leave out many highly important elements to understand why she is a human being. This challenge, as well as the idea put

<sup>4</sup> Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 228.

forward by Cassirer in his conclusion (that culture is a harmony among contrary elements) seems better addressed and developed by Henrique Vaz's proposal, the next and final step of this essay.

## 4 Henrique Vaz and the being towards transcendence

We have finally arrived to the author that is the real concern of this text. What has been done in the last pages, however, was not a deviation, but a needed assumption in order to clarify the question about Vaz's contribution to philosophical anthropology. Yet, given the expected length of this article, this account will have to be somewhat summarized, but I hope that even so it will be enough to show the elements in which his proposal includes the other authors' insights, and to which extent it can overcome them.

Starting with Cassirer, Vaz's anthropology seems clearly more complete than the neo-Kantian's. Instead of reducing the question about what is being human to an interrogation about what is culture, Vaz suggests to present a concept that takes into account this subject as a whole, in its various aspects. The challenge is enormous, but the chosen method aims to take benefit of the apparent inconsistencies and tensions among these differing facets. Employing his deep familiarity with Hegelian philosophy, obtained in decades of study of this German philosopher, Vaz is interested exactly in the difficulties and seeming paradoxes shown by the relationship of the components that constitute the complex human reality.

In other words, the Brazilian philosopher begins his approach exactly with the idea which Cassirer presents only at the end of *An Essay on Man*, namely, human affairs are better understood in a dialectic vision, of opposite coexistence. Still, the Brazilian goes much further, since he is not limited to enunciating and exemplifying them in each symbolic cultural expression (language, myth, religion, etc.). Apart from not constraining himself to culture only in his comprehension of human nature, taking the product for the producer, as Cassirer does, Vaz postulates explanatory principles in order to understand how it is possible the coexistence of opposites that show up in the unfolding of the concept of man. He proposes an understanding for those oppositions, so that they do not nullify each other, but rather get integrated. The concept of human being that Henrique Vaz proposes has three levels: 1) fundamental structures; 2) fundamental relations; and 3) fundamental unity. Each level unfolds in categories, being three for the first two levels and two for the last one.

Vaz begins his analysis with the elements that make up the human being structurally, as a subject that interrogates himself. The first category adopts the same starting point detected by Darwin in the above analysis: corporeality. As something evident at first, humans are endowed with bodies. However, as Darwin had also observed, the human body is ornamented or, as Cassirer would say, symbolized. Vaz goes deeper in the analysis of human corporeality, showing that it points to the fact that this exterior and apparent element presupposes an interior factor. This inside element permits the process of symbolization by means of which the human body ceases to be just a physio-biologic entity, but without stopping to be so at the same time. Our corporeality abides to the laws of nature that affects living beings, animals and primates in general. Yet, it is marked by symbolization, not only in external ornamentation, but also in the way our body reacts to external stimuli. Our sexuality, for example, is integrally mediated by culture: that which either stimulates or repeals in human sexuality refers to elements that are built up symbolically.

This interior element that turns the human body into something symbolically construed is what Vaz calls psychical life or the structural category of psychism. Although this category is the subject matter of many sciences, it has a dimension that seems to be irreducible to a strictly scientific study. For psychism is also part of an interrogating subject that is capable of an interior life, which is not completely transparent to an external study.

The relationship between corporeal exteriority and its supposed psychical interiority is one of organic interaction. This leads Vaz to propose a unifying category for them: the spirit. In order to clarify this concept, he resorts to a notion that includes four themes of classical thought: breath of life (*pneuma*), intellect (*nous*), the order that grants intelligibility to the world (*logos*) and self-awareness (*synesis*). Spirit would be this immaterial element that is essentially integrated in living bodies and that makes possible that human beings achieve a certain degree of knowledge about the world and themselves. It is the foundation

of our capacity of symbolization and of the process of autonomy as regards physical nature that makes it possible. It is spirit that makes a bridge between psychical interiority and corporeal exteriority.

Intelligence and freedom are the fundamental traits of spirit. For Vaz, they are manifested in the human being in a form that is both evident and limited. It is evident that we are able of intellection, symbolization and of taking initiatives, given the symbolic forms of culture and our remarkable capacity of adapting the world to our needs. Yet, it is also evident that intelligence and freedom are present in us in a finite, limited way. For him, this means we can define man in structural terms as a “spirit in the world”<sup>6</sup>.

Although being a “spirit in the world” is already a possible unifying definition of being human, this is so only in structural terms. The human agent is not defined only in himself, but also by means of various types of relations, which circumscribe his being in the world, in addition to reveal to him his own identity in view of his interaction with other agents. As a result, structural categories, in spite of being a plausible starting point for the conceptualization of humans, are incomplete if we do not add up to them the relationship concepts. According to Vaz, each structural category corresponds to a relationship that affects decisively the conformation and identity of the related structural element. This way, as corporeal beings, we are related to the world in a non-reciprocal manner, in an objective relationship. In the objectivity relation, we give meaning to the objective world by means of language and transform it through technique. By the same token, the world demands a steadfast effort of refinement of our objective comprehension, since objective reality seems never to be entirely captured by human linguistic constructions. On the other hand, technical work (in the broad sense of all human endeavors that employ knowledge about how to deal with the world) impacts not only external objects, but also our own bodies and lives as a whole, becoming an essential aspect of our subjective identity. This is why our profession or the part we play in the community work division is so important to define who we are.

In addition, since the objectivity relation is performed through language and technique, it is not restricted to exterior elements of the physical world, but presupposes another type of relationship as well, not only between subject and object, but also between subjects. Language supposes intersubjective communication, i.e. an interaction among the participants in the expressing process. On the other hand, technical work presumes cooperation among subjects involved in an enterprise, even when it is only tacit. In other words, the objectivity relation takes us to the intersubjective relationship.

In intersubjective relationship, the human agent reveals to be an “incomplete totality”. In a way, he is present to another person’s presence as a unity of body, psychism and spirit. But this unity is also in a constant process of construction by means of relationships that involve communication and cooperation, including their failures and shortcomings. Here the relationship stops being non-reciprocal, in which only one attributes meaning to a passive object. Rather, in intersubjective relations all parties are active subjects, being able to interrogate, responding, being questioned and getting answered. Vaz resorts here to the Hegelian notion of recognition, as the mediation by which a self-awareness being comes to know better of itself by means of the interaction with another self-awareness entity. The intersubjective relation is essentially a relationship of meeting and dialogue, where the fact of being in the world is overcome by the situation of being with another agent.

However, in the intersubjective relationship we find the problem of two subjects who need to be acknowledged as subjects, but who, in order to do that, turn the other subject into an object of their recognition. In other words, we face here the challenge of keeping the intelligible unity of the Ego in the community of “Us”. In order to overcome this difficulty, we need to assume an Us when we assert “I am”. This should be done not as an excluding imposition of either the Ego or the Other, in which the individual person is dissolved in the community or the community vanishes because of individual priorities, but in view of the primacy of being. The primacy of being is the condition for the recognition of one another as subjects under a same pattern that can be accepted by both. This pattern is something that all participants can recognize as internal to each of them, but also as being much more than any individual. According to Vaz, echoing perhaps a Platonic concept that links being and good, the primacy of being is also what makes possible that human groups become potentially ethical communities. For an ethical community requires

<sup>6</sup> Vaz, *Antropologia Filosófica I*, 186.

submission of all its members to norms and a common good that transcends them while is also recognized as interesting by each individual as well.

As a result, the dialectics between objective and intersubjective points to a third relationship category: transcendence. According to Vaz, the Transcendent is a possibility of overcoming this opposition, since it is both exterior to human mundane situation, and internal to our constitution as spirits. The dialectical identity between spirit and being brings about an “ontological excess” in the subject, which prevents us to identify with neither history nor nature. In other words, we do not see ourselves as (and we really are not) a mere product of history nor as totally determined by nature. This is so because the relation that characterizes us as spirits in the world is relationship with being. And the relationship with being is necessarily a transcendence relation, since we are finite and situated beings and not the being in itself, which is much more than ourselves.

The paradox of the transcendence relationship is that the subject may recognize the Absolute as the supreme final point of his own self-affirmation, showing then his dependence on it. In this sense, there is no reciprocity in the transcendence relation. However, between the human agent and the Absolute there is also a transparent relationship, since the Absolute is also an inner part of us as beings. So, as spirits, we exist as beings towards truth, towards good, and towards being, i.e. as beings towards transcendence. But as spirits in the world, this transcendence reveals to be also external to the experience of being human.

Vaz acknowledges that our experience of beauty, truth and good is limited, and sometimes very much so<sup>7</sup>. Yet, no matter how restricted it is, these are facets of the fundamental experience of being, which is the center of the transcendence relation. Philosophically speaking, the experience of being is metaphysical and can be considered on a par with the religious experience of the Absolute, although expressed in a logical and argumentative language. Philosophy and religion are two manners of living what Vaz calls “the fundamental relation of transcendence”. For the Brazilian philosopher, transcendence relationship would then be the soil where all human relations have their roots. There is no human experience in which we do not suppose matters as unity, truth, goodness, beauty, that is, of being which is presented in this same experience. This is why that is a constitutive relation for the human being.

Vaz admits there is a strong rejection in current philosophy to the idea of a transcendence relationship, given the widespread preference for naturalism and other forms of immanentist thought. Still, he argues that this rejection in fact assumes what it criticizes, since it intends to be an expression of intelligence and freedom, and these two facets of spirit (of being) are present in the human being and in the world in a very limited way. Contemporary philosophy has become an immense “exorcism rite of the Absolute”<sup>8</sup> due to a putative incompatibility between the reality of the Absolute in itself and of man as an artificer of himself. For Vaz, although the transcendence relation is non-reciprocal, the Absolute is also inside the most inner part of the human being as the source of spirit, the source of intelligence and freedom that characterizes us, but in which we share in a limited way. Human finitude points to the infinity of being, truth, good or, in a religious language, of God. The human being is, at the same time, essentially finite in view of the Absolute and constitutively open to it. The difficulties involved in the relations between objectivity and inter-subjectivity can then be resolved if we consider man as a being towards transcendence.

However, the fact that being human is both structurally definable and related to other agents and to the world may pose a problem. The question can be put as whether our relational character given by our openness to the other (the world, other subjects, the transcendent) does not threaten the structural unity of our subjectivity. In other words, does the fact that we are in constant relation to something or somebody outside ourselves imply that we are nothing essentially? If so, how could we be in a relationship at all?

In order to answer to this question, we can resort to the last level of conceptualization of man in Vaz’s philosophical anthropology: the fundamental unity of being human. The first level of this unity is given by the category of realization, which shows the way the unity of human beings is construed by means of the relations to the world, to people and to transcendent. Here we have the paradox of a permanent unification

<sup>7</sup> As a priest, he had a pastoral work at a very economically poor community on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte, and could accompany and give support to those who suffered the hardships and struggles of extreme poverty.

<sup>8</sup> Vaz, *Antropologia Filosófica II*, 121.



process, by which our existence is being built up as long as we are open to the other in its different aspects. We cannot be fulfilled as human beings unless by being open to the infinitude of Being. To get fulfilled is “to become what one is”, which is a chain of mediations through which the subject becomes a person, as a unity in oneself and in relation to the others. Every act in this chain is a part in the course of our realization as human beings. In this sense, our fulfillment is not given only in the realm of being, but also of values, of what should be. For our becoming what we are is a matter of searching for the best in our acts, since being human is essentially ethical, as Darwin had recognized.

It is a common and deep human experience the sense that the accomplishment of our lives is both a permanent challenge and a never finished task. In the realization category, metaphysical themes become existential dilemmas, put to us so that we can become what we are. Put differently, we live in a process of self-realization oriented towards the ideal of a better life, and having as horizon the Being in its infinite plenitude. Human existence is then the paradox of a never ending passage from being what we are to being what we should be, by means of which man surpasses man infinitely.

The second category of the last level for the comprehension of man as a subject is the notion of person. It is in it that the existential realization occurs as a unity between structure and relation. This means that existential fulfillment, which is the unity between being (body, psychism and spirit) and relation (objectivity, subjectivity and transcendence), presupposes a fundamental unity of the human subject expressed by the category of person. It is in the deep intimacy of personal life that we find the crossing of infinite intelligence and freedom with their expression in the finite subject. All vision of unity, all knowledge of truth and all acknowledgement of good are acts of a person, who operates the synthesis between what a human being is and what it should be. So, the final concept proposed by Vaz as a conclusion and synthesis of his route is the thesis that being human is being a person in this ultimately unifying sense.

For Vaz, given the infinite ontological density of the reality meant by the concept of person, this designation is more appropriate to the Absolute, and only in an analogical way to human individuals. It is in this sense that human persons, both in their essence and existence, should be thought to be beings towards transcendence.

## 5 Concluding remarks

As was mentioned previously, Henrique Vaz was aware of contemporary criticisms of the most central aspects of his philosophical anthropology, namely, the categories of spirit in the world, of being towards transcendence and of person. He was not impressed by the widespread popularity of immanentist approaches to philosophy nowadays, and saw those criticisms as a result of this preference. However, he also answered those objections vigorously, arguing they were incoherent in the sense of presupposing what they were denying and of being radically incomplete in their analyses<sup>9</sup>.

The idea of man as a being towards transcendence has a clear religious tone and this is probably why it sounds so aversive to immanentist philosophies. To be sure, religiosity for Vaz was only one of the aspects of this defining feature of being human, since transcendence is not only religious, but also aesthetical, ethical, epistemological, existential and metaphysical. In all this realms of human reality we have the tension between what there is and what there should be. However, religiosity is indeed a good candidate for being at the center of a broad inclusive concept of what is meant to be human, since it involves more than any other activity all the elements expressed in the meaning of being towards transcendence. So, even this potentially objectionable religious tone we can hear in Father Vaz's account may be thought to be a correct move.

This article aimed to argue that the Brazilian philosopher's approach was more complete than the ones with which we compared it. In the idea of a corporeal being, who is a spirit in the world, we can spot the most insightful ideas put forward by Darwin regarding human kind. And in the spelling out of the relation

<sup>9</sup> His criticism of Heidegger's thought as just another chapter in the modern dissolution of spiritual intelligence (Vaz, *Antropologia Filosófica I*, 248-264) is particularly bright.

categories, seeing man as a builder of the world and as someone who is also built by it, and as a subject in interaction with other subjects, we could identify Cassirer's effort to understand man as a culture maker. But Vaz was able to incorporate these contributions and overcome them at the same time, providing us with a useful guide to the highly complex object of philosophical anthropology. The Hegelian method of discerning the conceptual tensions of a matter and exploring them as a clue to perceiving its deep essence revealed to be an effective way of dealing with such a multifaceted subject.

On the other hand, the Hegelian-type language largely employed in Vaz's approach could also be thought to be one of his weak points. The matter is complex, it is true, but the Hegelian phraseology does not make it any easier and sometimes it just sounds a dispensable complication. In addition, it is possible that Vaz's conclusions are more applicable to human beings in our culture, who need to follow a non-definite route to become who they are. In this sense, he might be accused of being more particularistic than the proposals made by Darwin and Cassirer, as they were analyzed here. It may be that in the end of his route we might end up longing the concreteness of Darwin's exposition or of Cassirer's clear examples of the products of human spirit.

Yet, no matter how problematic may be his approach and objectionable his conclusions, it seems undeniable that Henrique Vaz has provided us with a very useful and deep understanding of a highly traditional subject of philosophical thought. Vaz is a Latin American thinker, who deserves more attention, and I hope this article may contribute to stimulate the interest in his thought. He has given a meaningful contribution to the understanding of what is like to be human, and our undeniable vocation to transcendence.<sup>10</sup>

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