LINGUISTICS, HISTORICISM AND THE HUMANITIES

Jan Koster

1. Introduction

From the point of view of a theoretical linguist, the period that covered most of Arthur van Essen's academic career, the second half of the 20th century, was extremely interesting. It was a time of big changes, both in the field of linguistics and in the Dutch university system. What I would like to do here is to highlight a few of the cultural phenomena and changes that both Arthur and I were witness to and to express my current attitude towards those developments.

When I became a university student in 1963, Dutch philosophy, both in the university and in the public arena, was dominated by phenomenology and existentialism. Interest in phenomenology was oriented towards figures like Husserl, Heidegger, Jaspers and Merleau-Ponty, while the more popular and life-style-oriented existentialism venerated heroes like Sartre and Camus. All of these philosophers came from the Old World and it is therefore not obviously true that European culture was instantaneously Americanised as a result of the Second World War. Even the analytic philosophers of the other winner of the war, Great Britain, were hardly known outside small circles of specialists.

I remember that I spent all the money I could on cheap pocket books (Arthur will remember the *Aula* series) to find out more about existentialism and phenomenology. I did not understand much of all those unreadable introductions and soon lost my interest in current philosophy. I think this kind of reaction was not uncommon among philosophically interested students of my generation.

All of that changed as a result of J.F. Staal's article *Zinloze en Zinvolle Filosofie* in *De Gids* of 1967.[1] For me at least, it came as an enormous relief to read that it was not my personal failure that I did not understand Heidegger and that all those phenomenological and existential philosophies were just meaningless nonsense. Starting a little bit earlier, the then most famous Dutch novelist Willem Frederik Hermans had drawn attention to Wittgenstein and the Wiener Kreis, and for a little while there was a vivid interest in Frege, Quine, Wittgenstein, Strawson, Ryle and other analytic philosophers.[2] Staal pointed out that Chomsky's rationalism went a step beyond the limitations of the empiricist philosophers. All of this sounded enormously appealing to me and when I found out that you could combine such philosophical interests with the empirical handwork of linguistics, I had at last found my intellectual niche.

Needless to say, that also had to do with Chomsky's political interests. The general intellectual climate in Holland in the second half of the 1960s became rather leftist and the short-lived interest in analytical philosophy was soon superseded by a passion for Marxism and its variants. Not being a Marxist myself, I found Chomsky's ideas also very attractive from this perspective because they combined interest in radical social reform with non-Marxist, more mind-oriented ideas about a universal human nature and the non-authoritarian forms of social organization that I knew from (and admired in) the Dutch anarchistic tradition (with figures like Arthur Lehning and others).[3]

As in most of the Western world, this interesting cultural climate did not really survive the restoration of the Reagan-Thatcher years. The *Zeitgeist* underwent enormous transformations and –speaking about the more privileged segments of society-- whole generations have grown up who are much more interested in stock-market gambling and in e-commerce than in radical social reform. To the extent there is still public interest in

philosophy, it is dominated by some form of postmodernism, which in its usual popular interpretation is just a kind of cultural relativism. As in the US, names like Heidegger have become fashionable again and many sought to find inspiration in the works of French philosophers like Derrida or somewhat more transparent thinkers like the American philosopher Richard Rorty.

What I would like to argue here is that the impression of philosophical variation in the post-war period was more apparent than real. Existentialism, the ideas of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, British analytic philosophy, popular Marxism and postmodernism are all different, but in one important respect --perhaps *the* most important respect— these philosophies are very similar and stand in opposition to the kind of rationalism underlying modern linguistics and cognitive science as inspired by Chomsky, Fodor and others. I would like to refer to this similarity as "the received view of the humanities". This view, as I see it, emerged in the early 19th century as the combined result of British empiricism and German Romantic thought.

According to the received view of the humanities, cultural phenomena (including language) should not be seen as the expression of universal principles, but as things that are "historically determined". In this view, the manifestations of the human mind are historically contingent or, at best, the result of "laws" applying to realities *external* to the human mind. According to the rationalistic alternative, the human mind has rich intrinsic and universal properties, which are based on biological and ultimately physical necessity. The empiricist/Romantic view emphasizes the uniqueness of cultural phenomena and therefore often entails a certain amount of cultural relativism. The rationalist view emphasizes the common ground of all humanity.[4]

Another consequence of the received view of the humanities is that there are what C.P. Snow once called "two cultures", each with its own methodology and modes of understanding.[5] The humanities or "Geisteswisschenschaften" are supposed to avoid the quest for general laws and are instead encouraged to describe and understand "the unique" in a mysterious process not found in the natural sciences, a process known as "Verstehen" (Wilhelm Dilthey).[6]

Modern theoretical linguistics challenges this dichotomy of the sciences and the humanities and assumes that there is only one form of rational inquiry, namely the one exemplified by the natural sciences. Needless to say, most of human reality is currently (and perhaps forever) beyond scientific understanding and in many cases we have to rely on our common sense. However, the received view of the humanities is much more than just a plea for common sense understanding. It is a dogmatic ideology about the nature of cultural phenomena and it has often precluded progress even in areas in which normal scientific thinking is possible, such as in the case of language. In linguistics, for instance, it has led to the obviously false but still influential idea that each language should be understood on its own terms and that non-trivial generalizations about language cannot be made and should therefore not be pursued.

The damaging and ideologically motivated idea of the "two cultures" has affected both scientists and scholars in the humanities and it has often made modern linguistics the odd man out in our academies. The received view of the humanities is "gesunkenes Kulturgut": we are hardly aware of its ideological function, it is a nearly self-evident part of a typical intellectual education in our society and therefore an optimally effective form of indoctrination.

2. The assault on human nature

In the 1960s in Holland, when analytical philosophy claimed a place under the sun next to the dominating phenomenology, some Dutch philosophers surprisingly claimed that Wittgenstein and British analytical philosophy on the one hand and continental philosophy with figures like Heidegger on the other hand were not all that different after all (see for instance Van Peursen 1968). At the time, this was a remarkable insight because Heidegger and the British philosophers of language were often considered opposite extremes on some scale of rationality. Some decades later, we see that the similarities are confirmed by many philosophers all over the world. Rorty (1980), for instance, clearly bases his philosophy on both traditions.

Personally (and relatively speaking), I find Ryle and Strawson exemplars of rationality compared to Heidegger, but the widely felt similarities have an interesting basis in reality. British empiricism and German Romanticism had a common effect and jointly formed the basis of the received view of the humanities: they undermined the idea of a rich and universal human nature, particularly the idea of such a nature as rooted in forms of biological and (meta)physical necessity. This is what the offspring of British empiricism (Darwinism, positivism and behaviourism) and German Romanticism (Wittgenstein, Heidegger, existentialism and phenomenology) had in common.

Chomsky (1975, 128-129) cites Gramsci and Lucien Malson, who argued that Marxist and other modern innovations of thought did away with the idea of a fixed and immutable human nature. Chomsky paraphrases Malson as categorically asserting 'that "the idea that man has no nature is now beyond dispute"; the thesis that man "has or rather is a history," nothing more, "is now the explicit assumption of all main currents of contemporary thought," not only Marxism, but also existentialism, behaviourism, and psychoanalysis.'

If there is no fixed human nature, the human mind at birth is usually seen as a blank slate, to be written upon by environmental contingencies. The human mind thus conceived is extremely malleable, also in the recent words of Rorty (1998, 169-170):

> We are much less inclined than our ancestors were to take "theories of human nature" seriously [...]. We are much less inclined to pose the ontological question "What *are* we?" because we have come to see that the main lesson of both history and anthropology is our extraordinary malleability.

From an empirical point of view, this statement is just absurd, as amply demonstrated by modern linguistics. But even from the point of view of common sense, such opinions strike me as pure dogmatism and obvious falsehoods. The irrationality of Rorty's view, widely shared within the humanities, is exposed if we reformulate it as a statement about physical nature:

> We are much less inclined than our ancestors were to take "theories of physical nature" seriously [...]. We are much less inclined to pose the ontological question "What *is* physical reality?" because we have come to see that the main lesson of both history and everyday experience is the extraordinary diversity of nature.

Put this way, not a single physicist (or even biologist) would take it seriously. The logical fallacy is striking: there simply is no argument from superficial, observational diversity to underlying, theoretical diversity. On the contrary, the core business of physics is to explain apparent diversity in terms of the underlying unity of a few simple and universal laws.

Whether the same underlying unity can be found in affairs human or not is an empirical question and should not be a matter of dogmatic declarations. Wherever we have actually

tried to find unity underlying superficial diversity, as in the study of language, the results have been more than promising.

Ideas of an initially empty and malleable human mind have always been considered progressive and were all too obviously ideologically motivated, as was pointed out by Harry Bracken in several books and articles (for instance, Bracken 1984). The idea of an empty and malleable mind seemed to be attractive from the point of view of equality at birth ("all men are born equal") and from the point of view of limitless perfectibility through education. At least part of the philosophers of the Enlightenment and ideologues of liberalism embraced the malleability thesis. John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), formulates the malleability thesis in terms hardly different from those of 20th-century behaviourists like Watson or Skinner.

Given an initially empty and malleable human mind, the next question, of course, is how the human mind gets filled and how humans are distinguished from one another. It is here that German Romanticism and, as I will argue, Darwinism provided the other half of the ideology entailed by the received view of the humanities. From a certain point of view, German Romanticism and Darwinism are, in spite of all their differences, just two variants of the 19th-century, historicist attack on the idea of a universal human nature.[7]

German Romantic philosophers hardly shared the epistemological and ontological assumptions of their British empiricist colleagues, but nevertheless we see a shift in general outlook away from the intrinsic nature of the universal human mind. The overall philosophical picture of 19th-century Germany is complex and diverse, but nevertheless we can distinguish two main trends resulting from the Romantic movement: one stressing *individual* historical uniqueness and choice, the other emphasizing the historical uniqueness of some group, the social class or the *Volk*.

The first trend can be found in philosophers like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and eventually led to various forms of voluntarism and other philosophies emphasizing the unique choices of some unique individual. According to Berlin (1999, ch. 4), the assertion of the primacy of the will (as found in this trend), goes back to the otherwise anti-Romantic Kant, who considered a value only a value if it were based on completely free choice completely independent of any deterministic background. Whether or not this interpretation of Kant is correct, it seems to be justified to conclude that the emphasis on the will of some unconstrained and unique individual played a role in the emergence of fascistic thought (Berlin, *op.cit.*, p. 145).

In the case of existentialism, its roots in Romantic, anti-universalist individualism are even more obvious. Existentialism rejected any metaphysical structure of the universe and objected to all "essences", particularly the idea of a fixed human nature (cf. Berlin, *op.cit.*, p. 143). An existentialist thinks he or she chooses his or her own form of life in the freedom of a complete metaphysical vacuum.

To what extent Karl Marx's thought was still rooted in certain concepts of Enlightenment universalism is an interesting question which I will put aside here. In practice, however, Marxism tended to deny the idea of an intrinsic human nature as well and deemed the content of one's mind dependent on perhaps lawful, but ultimately unique historical processes *external* to the individual human mind. Ideology and the life of the mind, according to standard Marxist thought, are a reflection of the dialectic of the development of things material as culminating in contemporary class struggle. In full accordance with the Romantic tradition, it definitely sees human beings as the result of history.

The idea that one's culture and language are not an expression of universal and individual human nature, but the reflection of one unique group –class, tribe or *Volk*— is among the most characteristic thoughts of Romanticism. It can be found in Vico's *New Science*, but much more influential were the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder, who can be seen as the true

father of cultural particularism (Berlin 1977, 1999). Although he did not entirely give up Enlightenment universalism, he nevertheless contributed to the idea that each culture has its own unique character and should be understood on its own terms. Later thinkers, like Fichte, gave a more outspoken nationalistic twist to such ideas and it easily led to the idea that nations were the expression of a *Volksgeist* not only unique but also superior to whatever other peoples had to offer.

Was the idea of a mind empty at birth originally an egalitarian idea, in practice it could not avoid the fact that this mind had to be filled by very different historical experiences, both of individuals and of collective bodies such as nations. So, what started as a seemingly progressive idea, easily ended up as the basis for an ideology of a humanity divided and fragmented according to the unique experiential lines of class, race and *Volk*. The idea of a fixed, immutable and rich human nature was destroyed by British empiricism and was no longer available to counterbalance the avalanche of irrational ideologies emphasizing human divisions in the 19th century. Where the idea of human nature is given up, emphasis on the diversity and the historical contingency of experience take over. We still see many examples of this Romantic heritage, such as the absurd belief that Croats are very different from Serbs or that Palestinians are from another planet than Jews. Historicism, with its relativist and often tribal implications, became the norm in the humanities since the 19th century.

This overall trend was greatly supported by an often overlooked contributor to 19th-century irrationalism, namely Darwinism. Since the second half of the 19th century, Darwinism contributed an aggressive element of ruthless struggle and competition to the already existing empiricist-Romantic heritage of human division and fragmentation.

3. The Newton of biology

The following assessment of Darwin is not uncommon in our culture: "Darwin was undeniably the focus of the greatest conceptual revolution in the history of biology. He must therefore be ranked with the Newtons and Einsteins whose claim to genius has rarely been challenged..."[8] So, what did Darwin discover? Not the idea of evolution, because that already existed in his day. Darwin observed that breeders could bring about modifications within species by selective breeding. What he suggested is that nature could do the same, thanks to the fact that individuals are competing for limited resources. Given the ubiquitous natural variation within species, some would be more successful in this competition and therefore have a greater chance to produce offspring than others. Over long periods of time, the result would be similar to the selectional differentiation brought about by human breeders.

If this were all, it is hard to see why Darwin's achievement should be compared to the contributions of Newton and Einstein. The latter discovered non-trivial and relatively simple laws of nature, explaining numerous classes of seemingly different facts. It is far from clear whether "natural selection" can be compared to this or even should be called an explanation at all. Suppose you came from Mars and were very ignorant of dog-breeding and found out one day that there are so many different breeds of dogs thanks to the fact that breeders make selections in their breeding procedures. You would certainly have made some kind of discovery, but would you have the feeling that you had *explained* variation among dogs and that you could rightly claim to be a Martian Newton or Einstein from now on?

Just suggesting a factor that might be instrumental in certain processes (like speciation) is something very different from explaining those processes. It is widely assumed, for instance, that neurological processes cause our thoughts. The problem is that nobody knows how and therefore the brain sciences are still awaiting their Newton or Einstein. Similarly, Darwin does

not give a hint of an explanation how the very gradual processes responsible for variation and development *within* a species can lead to entirely new species.

There is more to Darwin's contributions than said so far, but to praise him as a Newton or Einstein on the basis of his main discovery –a natural equivalent of the human selective breeder— is preposterous. If somebody is so often praised to the heavens on the basis of so little, something ideological must be at stake.

I have to say at the outset that I am not a creationist, that I believe in evolution and even in some role of natural selection. I also believe that we have to thank Darwin for the fact that evolution has become a standard feature of the scientific world view.

That being said, it must be added immediately that it is very questionable if any of Darwin's further ideas has ever been confirmed by scientific research. Darwin did not just believe in evolution but in extreme gradualism over considerable periods of time. His favourite motto was *Natura non facit saltum* ("nature does not make jumps") and he believed in nearly seamless continuity, not only with respect to the variation *within* a species, but also with respect to the variation *between* species. In current terminology, Darwin did not see a principled distinction between microevolution and macroevolution: the difference between variation within a species and variation leading to speciation was not an essential, qualitative difference but only a matter of degree. This theory predicted infinitesimal gradations and missing links between all species and the fact that these were practically never found was seen as due to the imperfection of the fossil record.[9]

As shown by Arthur Lovejoy (1936), these ideas go back to the antique conception of the Great Chain of Being with its principles of plenitude and continuity.

As it stands, Darwin's version of evolution theory only is a plausible theory of micro-evolution. As for macroevolution and speciation, numerous proposals have been made over the years, but only a biased observer can maintain that Darwinism has been successful in that respect. We know much more about the fossil record than in Darwin's day, but it cannot be said that his view of very gradual changes over longer periods of time is confirmed. Instead, organisms remain the same over very long periods of time, while changes take place in relatively short periods, for instance as the result of dramatic ecological changes brought about by catastrophes (everybody has heard about the meteor that killed the dinosaurs).

Several other non-Darwinian mechanisms of speciation have been proposed, such as relatively selection-free and neutral restructurings at the level of DNA and also speciation resulting from symbiosis. The pioneer of symbiotic explanations of evolution, Lynn Margulis (1998, 7-8) has not been able to find a single well-documented and convincing example of the formation of a new species along strict Darwinian lines, neither in the field, nor in the fossil record, nor in laboratory settings.

Given this (no doubt disputed) lack of empirical success, Darwin's fame as a scientific hero is remarkable, to say the least.

I think the solution to the riddle must be found in what Darwin contributed in the department of ideology. Before going into this, I would like to give some reasons why classical Darwinism *could* not have succeeded empirically.

For a linguist and cognitive scientist, the logic of the situation is curiously familiar. The revolution that took place in the 1950s in these fields completely did away with the then powerful behaviourism of Skinner, which (given its total lack of scientific plausibility) was exposed as thinly disguised ideology (see, for instance, Chomsky 1972). The relevant point in this context is that Skinner's behaviourism was, like Darwinism, a selection theory. With a so-called Skinner box, the experimenter acts like Darwin's breeder by selectively rewarding the desired behaviour (of the animal in the box), which is thus selected over some period of time.

During the cognitive revolution of the past 50 years, it has become clear why such Skinnerian selection theories are non-theories: selection as such is trivial; what matters is the

size and nature of the selection space, the range of options from which the selections are made. Thus, linguists see language acquisition as a form of selection. How that is done is a non-trivial matter, but there is near consensus that selections are made from a very narrow range of options specified by what is called Universal Grammar. What makes linguistics explanatory is not the fact that grammars are acquired by selection but the narrowly constrained theory about possible options, the theory of Universal Grammar.

The logic is exactly the same in the case of evolution. One can entirely agree with Darwin that evolution is based (among other things) on natural selection, but Darwin's contributions are comparable to Skinner's rather than to those of Newton and Einstein, as long as nothing is said about the range of selection options. This really is Darwin's Achilles' heel and, at the same time, his relative silence on the selection space is the basis of Darwin's usefulness as an ideological icon.

What would be the equivalent of Universal Grammar in the case of evolutionary theory? A number of things, the constraints set by physical law being most prominent among them. Everybody agrees that evolution takes place within a channel determined by physical law and that evolution is the combined result of physical necessity and historical contingency.[10] What makes Darwin remarkable in retrospect is that he and his followers almost completely shifted the balance from physical necessity to the role of the environment ("adaptation") and its historical accidents. This was by no means necessary, as was a long time ago insightfully observed in the classical work of D'Arcy Thompson (1917). One of the most interesting trends in current biology is the new emphasis on mathematical structure and the role of physics in evolution.[11] As in ontogeny, it seems to me, the theory of phylogeny can only become an explanatory science if the trivial idea of selection is supplemented with mathematical and physically-based theories about the selection channel.

4. Darwin and humans-as-history

Why, then, was Darwin so useful for the privileged from an ideological point of view? As we have seen, Darwinism should not be confused with the excellent idea of evolution itself. The value system underlying Darwinism, in its classical form and even more so in the dogmatic form of the so-called New Synthesis, is just classical empiricism derived from Darwin's familiarity with the ideas of John Locke.[12] Long before Darwin came to the fore, the classical British empiricists had already undermined the Platonic-Aristotelian idea of natural kinds (species). In rationalist philosophies, concepts are characterized by necessary and sufficient conditions and are also known as essences. The idea we started out with, that we are characterized by a fixed human nature, is such a concept. British empiricism destroyed this idea and thus opened the door for 19th-century historicism, with its emphasis on contingency and the uniqueness (in practice often the superiority) of individuals and tribes.

It is precisely this biased world view that Darwin imposed upon nature and that in turn was seen by his followers as something "discovered" by their "hard" methods of science. We should therefore not be surprised when we read the following in Dennett (1995, 201-202):

> Nothing complicated enough to be really interesting could have an essence (...). This anti-essentialist theme was recognized by Darwin as a truly revolutionary or metaphysical accompaniment to his science; we should not be surprised by how hard it is for people to swallow.

This gives it away: Darwin is so great because he gave a scientific underpinning to empiricist ideology! The same point is made by David Hull (1973), who dedicates a whole appreciative chapter (chapter 5) to Darwin's deconstruction of essentialism.

British empiricism and German Romantic historicism undermined the idea of a fixed human nature, but the contributions of these philosophies look almost bleak compared to what Darwinism did by allegedly empirical methods: according to Darwin, not only humans lacked an essential nature, but all organisms! According to Hull (*op.cit*., p. 73) it was Darwin's great contribution that he dissociated the biological species concept from the essentialist natural kind concept as exemplified by the chemical elements. For Darwin, biological species become *historical* entities and the idea of a species with an essential nature is replaced by the non-essential and endlessly graded variety as entailed by "population thinking".

If one wants to know how this new, historicized species concept was applied to human society, it is very instructive to read Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871). During the next 80 years, social Darwinism became one of the most pernicious contributors to the aggressive concepts of social and national competitive struggle as found both in Europe and the United States (see for instance Hofstadter 1992). It is a standard part of the deification of Darwin to say that this friendly Victorian himself contributed nothing to the horrible consequences that others derived from his thought.[13]

In reality, however, Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871) contains so many passages that illustrate his dubious *Weltanschauung* that it is hard to make a choice, but the following passages is perhaps one of the most telling (chapter 6, p. 201):

> At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes, as Professor Schaaffhausen has remarked,* will no doubt be exterminated. The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilised state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla.
>
> * Anthropological Review, April, 1867, p. 236

This thought of the Newton of biology is not only downright racist, it also can be interpreted as an alibi for dubious eugenics or even genocide, as was often done, for instance under the influence of Darwin's German follower and pen friend Ernst Haeckel.[14]

The destruction of the idea of a species essence also goes very well together with sexism, as can be read in chapter 19 (p.316):

> Man is more courageous, pugnacious and energetic than woman, and has a more inventive genius. His brain is absolutely larger, but whether or not proportionately to his larger body, has not, I believe, been fully ascertained.

Many examples of this kind could be added, but the outcome of anti-essentialist historicism is always the same: if humans have no essential nature, they are endlessly different and ranked in accordance with the merits of their individual and tribal *history*. For many Germans since Hegel and Fichte the optimal outcome of such historical processes was the Prussian state with its superior citizens. For Marx, history culminated in the vanguard of the working class. As shown by the passages above, Darwin had his own conception of the rejects of history and for him history culminated in the most highly acclaimed Caucasian variety the world had ever seen, the civilized Victorian gentleman of Great Britain.

If we believe instead in a rich and fixed human nature shared across the species, all such ideas of an endlessly graded humanity ("population thinking") and its ethnocentric and sexist historical peaks cannot even be formulated.

5. Conclusion

The dominant concept in our culture of what human beings are is still determined by the combined results of British empiricism and the historicism cultivated in the wake of German Romanticism. Darwinism, as we have seen, contributed much to the idea of species determined by historical contingency rather than by physical necessity. In its non-philosophical variants, the largely false and ideologically motivated idea of humans-as-history is conveyed by the more implicit received view of the humanities. It is almost generally believed, for instance, that human forms of aesthetics and ethics are "culturally determined" and contingent and the idea that aesthetic and moral ideas are partially universal and grounded in necessary and essential aspects of our nature (or of reality itself) is extremely unpopular.[15]

Modern linguistics, but also the revival of mathematical and physical ideas in biology, are the main counterforces in the long way we still have to go from the idea of humans-as-history to the concept of humans-as-largely-determined-by-physical-necessity. The prevalence of the empiricist-Romantic idea of the historicist humanities explains much of the resistance that modern theoretical linguistics still meets. The hostility often also comes from the side of the traditional language studies, which mostly survive in departments of non-European languages (often misleadingly referred to as "descriptive linguistics").[16]

The scientific basis for the idea of humans-as-history is practically nil and its ideological nature is hardly recognized. Postmodernism was just the latest variant of this unfortunate heritage of empiricism and Romanticism. It mainly differed from earlier variants in its more egalitarian outlook. These gains are perhaps real (we lived through the 1960s, after all), but ultimately they are not sufficient if we realize that this new variant is also an ideology that divides and fragmentises human groups, namely by denying their rich and universal common ground. In an increasingly multicultural society, this is a less hopeful perspective than often thought and it is avoidable if we cultivate the promising cognitive theories that seek to discover the rich properties of our common nature.

Notes

[1] The translation of the Dutch title is: 'Meaningless and Meaningful Philosophy.'

[2] Hermans (1964) contained a chapter on Wittgenstein, who was till then relatively unknown in Holland. Further discussion of Wittgenstein and analytic philosophy was much stimulated by Hermans (1967).

[3] See for instance Lehning (1966).

[4] Modern rationalistic cognitive science, as inspired by Chomsky and others, usually sees itself in opposition to empiricism, both in its classical forms (Locke, etc.) and its modern forms (behaviorism, etc.). Although I fully agree with the assessment of empiricism in question, it seems to me that the role of Romanticism is usually underestimated. German Romanticism, which has thoroughly influenced the humanities until the present day (particularly also in their postmodern form), was probably the most pervasive transformation ever in European intellectual history (Berlin 1999:1). Although anti-universalism was a regular phenomenon since Antiquity, it became the norm in the Romantic era, most of all in Germany but also elsewhere: 'That change, in short, has consisted in the substitution of what may be called diversitarianism for uniformitarianism as the ruling preconception in most of the normative provinces of thought' (Lovejoy 1936: 294). Although I am not blind for certain cultural enrichments of the human experience since the Romantic era, I am afraid Berlin (1999) was still much too optimistic about the consequences of Romanticism. By emphasizing diversity and uniqueness of individuals and peoples, Romanticism (together with British empiricism) destroyed the idea of a rich common ground shared by all people. It became the basis of numerous forms of irrationalism, most pernicious of which were the nationalism and racism that would almost finish Europe in the 20th century.

[5] Snow (1959).

[6] See for instance Dilthey (1883), also Plantinga (1980).

[7] See Mandelbaum (1971) for an excellent introduction to the nature and roles of the ideas of malleability and historicism in the 19th century. See also Chomsky (1972).
[8] Stephen Jay Gould, cited on the back cover of Gruber (1981).
[9] In reality, it must perhaps be said that the fossil record *refutes* Darwin's gradualism, a reason why paleontologists have often been more sceptical than biologists. Stanley (1979:1) speaks about 'a false belief, tracing back to Darwin and his early followers, that the fossil record is woefully incomplete. Actually, the record is of sufficiently high quality to allow us to undertake certain kinds of analysis meaningfully at the level of the species. Such analysis shows that many ideas now enjoying widespread support among biologists are in need of re-examination.'
[10] See Chomsky (1999) and Koster (1982 and 1998).
[11] See for instance Kauffman (1993), Stewart (1998) and Ball (1999). For approaches conceptually related to linguistics (algorithms, parameter setting, etc.), see Prusinkiewicz and Lindenmayer (1990) and Meinhardt (1998).
[12] Locke was very popular in the milieu in which Darwin grew up (cf. Gruber 1981:22). Darwin's anti-essentialist species concept seems to be derived from Locke (1689). Locke made a distinction between "real essences" and "nominal essences", the latter being convenient abstract ideas which did not correspond to any "real essences" in the things described. It is not generally known, but Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) is in a sense a misnomer because Darwin in fact followed Locke in giving up the concept of a biological "species" altogether by reducing it to "variety" (as also found *within* a species). Thus, Darwin describes his view as '...the view that species are only strongly marked and permanent varieties...' (*op. cit.*, p. 467). This blurring of the distinction between variety and species comes straight from Locke, who wrote: 'I would fain know, why a Shock [a dog with long, shaggy hair, --JK] and a Hound, are not as distinct *Species*, as a Spaniel and an Elephant' (*op.cit*. Book III, Chap. VI, § 38). The New Synthesis, a term coined by Julian Huxley, was the neo-Darwinian consensus arising in the early 1950s which combined genetics, taxonomy, paleontology and other disciplines on the basis of extreme anti-essentialist gradualism. This dogmatic consensus, as empiricist in its outlook as behaviourism, does not exist anymore.
[13] Gruber (1981:240) on social Darwinism: 'Ironically, Darwin never entertained such an idea'. However, Gruber mentions *The Descent of Man* (Darwin 1871) on the same page, in which we read things like: 'There should be open competition for all men; and the most able should not be prevented by laws or customs from succeeding best and rearing the largest number of offspring' (p. 403) or: 'There is apparently much truth in the belief that the wonderful progress of the United States, as well as the character of the people, are the result of natural selection;' (p. 179).
[14] Social Darwinism was a core doctrine not only of ruthless, competitive capitalism (Hofstadter 1944), but also of Nazism. The latter connection has received less attention than it deserves (but see Gasman 1971). Ernst Haeckel was Germany's most famous biologist in the 19th and early 20th century, a friend of Darwin's and a populariser of Darwinian thought on the Continent. Haeckel, a figure of great international stature, gave anti-Semitism its biological dimension by 'adding the "biological inferiority" twist to the Jewish question' (Noll 1994:85; see also Gasman 1971 for Haeckel and Ostwald's Monistic League as an early expression of Nazi ideas, such as eugenics, based on Social Darwinism). At the end of his life, Haeckel was a member of the Thule Society, a precursor of the Nazi party, with members such as Rudolph Hess (Noll, *op.cit*.: 51). It is just a myth that there was no connection between Darwinism on the one hand and eugenics or genocidal attitudes towards "inferior races" on the other side.
[15] Recently, some promising attempts were made to study human aesthetic appreciation from a universalistic point of view, for instance Hardonk (1999). Another hopeful recent development is the emergence of the field of ethnomathematics (see for instance Ascher 1998 and Eglash 1999). Next to linguistics, there are plenty of possibilities to study the rich common ground shared by all members of our species. Note once more that the roots of racism can be found in empiricist denials of our common ground, as in Locke 1689, Book I, chap. 2, § 27: 'But alas, amongst *Children*, *Ideots*, *Savages*, and the grosly *Illiterate*, what general Maxims are to be found? What universal Principles of Knowledge?'
[16] The term "descriptive linguistics" is misleadingly used to refer to those forms of linguistics that are based on the (often implicit) Romantic, historicist and relativistic *theories* criticized in this article. Of course, all forms of linguistics have both a theoretical and a descriptive dimension. What distinguishes the various forms of linguistics is *theories*, not the dedication to descriptive adequacy.

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