Constitutive Relations: A Philosophical Anthropology

Lyubov Bugaeva and John Ryder

This is an essay in philosophical anthropology that explores two themes: 1) an understanding of human being as relationally constituted, and 2) the constitutive role of absence in human being. The authors present and explore the general ideas of the American philosopher Justus Buchler and their intersection with those of Nicholas Rescher, Jacques Lacan, Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen. The authors contend that a relational conception of human being is both plausible and desirable, and that absence or lack is a distinctive constitutive feature of human being.

Introduction

It is a truism, and on the face of it a rather vacuous one, that societies consist, among other things, or people in various relations with one another. Though obvious enough, this point does suggest that if we are to engage the many philosophical issues concerned with society and social theory, we invariably need some conception of human being, which is to say we need some understanding of what it is to be a person. A society will be understood quite differently if, for example, we choose to understand persons as themselves inherently relational entities rather than, as Adam Smith and many others have, as atoms interacting with one another in private and public spheres.

This essay is an exploration of a relational understanding of human being, by which we mean a point of view in which human beings are relationally constituted. In Part I we will describe a general ontology of constitutive relations, as well as what we can call a relational metaphysics of human being. Part II is an illustration of a relational view of human being through the consideration of a specific kind of human trait. The relational constitution of human being, we suggest, is evident in the role of absence in human nature.

Part I

Relationality and Human Being

An Ontology of Constitutive Relations

The idea that human being, or human nature if you will, is relationally constituted is a specific application of the more general idea that everything is relationally constituted. We will begin with this latter, more general point, which is to say that we begin with a description of a general ontology of constitutive relations. Once this general idea is described it will be possible to explore its implications for an understanding of human being.

The history of philosophy is dominated by the idea that although in experience there is ample evidence of relations among entities, behind, or underneath, those relations is something non-relational. For Platonic idealism it is eternal forms, for Aristotelianism in its many forms it is substance, and for modern rationalism and empiricism it is also substance in one or another of its versions. For Berkeley it is mind, and for Hegel it is Absolute Spirit. With few exceptions, those who were inclined to reject the existence or knowledge of a non-relational substratum were driven to a more or less serious skepticism. Hume comes to mind as an example of one form of such skepticism. By the 20th century in British philosophy, for example in Russell, talk of substance gave way to an assumption of some variety of monadism. And in another strain of thought, I have the later Wittgenstein in mind, the attempt to describe the general character of entities was abandoned altogether. Rarely, however, has the possibility been entertained that what exists, that is anything at all, can be usefully understood as relational in its nature. On the contrary, it was usually taken for granted that if there are relations in reality, then there must be absolute entities of some kind that stand in relation. As the early Wittgenstein put it in an implied but striking *non sequitur*, the simple is implied by the complex, so that the existence of the simple object is a logical necessity (Wittgenstein 1969, 60). In this he was following Leibniz, who put it rather starkly: if there are simples there must be complexes (Leibniz 1986, 251).

By contrast to this dominant trend in the history of European philosophy, we want to propose that whatever is, in any sense or way at all, is in its nature complex, and complex in such a way that its nature is constituted by the relations among its traits, and that its traits, whatever they are, are themselves relationally constituted complexes. This is a complicated proposition, which we will now unpack.[1] The idea, again, is that everything, by which we mean material objects, ideal entities, histories, ideas, dreams, fictional characters, logical principles, actualities, possibilities, God, human being, and anything else one can mention or point to, whether a human product or not, is constituted by its traits and the relations among them. The details of an ontology of constitutive relations, as we will call this general idea, can be described both positively and negatively, i.e. both by what it means and what it does not mean. We will begin with a negative description.

Any entity of any kind whatsoever, let us use the term "complex" as the term with the widest possible scope, is constituted by the relations among its traits. It is important to understand that a trait is not to be understood as contained in a complex, nor is a complex to be understood as a container of traits. The traditional distinction between internal and external traits is misleading. Traits are neither internal nor external, neither "contained in" a complex nor outside of it. Rather they are more or less strongly constitutive of the complex. Some traits of a complex are parts of the complex, but not all are. The root system of a plant, for example, is a part of the plant and a constitutive trait. But the chemical characteristics of the plant's physical environment are not parts, yet they are constitutive traits of the plant in that they are directly related to the plant's health and its activities. The metaphors of a complex as container or as a collection of parts must be given up if we are to understand an ontology of constitutive relations.

The tendency to understand a complex as a container has given rise to another common idea that must be rejected. It is often asserted, or at least implicitly accepted, that everything that exists constitutes a whole of some kind, for example creation as a whole, or the "whole of nature." Sense can be given to such expressions if one is careful. It is possible to speak of the whole of nature, for example, if by that expression one means simply everything that "is" in a distributive sense. But it is senseless to speak of nature as a whole if one means a whole system of nature. A relational ontology neither assumes nor implies an overarching, integrated system of complexes, or a sense of nature or reality in which everything is related to everything else. There are complexes, innumerable ones at that, and each is constituted by its relations, but there is no reason to think that each is constitutively related to all the others. There is not, in other words, a whole of nature in the sense of one big complex.[2]

It has also been common in the history of philosophy to regard some things as "more real" than other things: parts more real than a whole, or the whole more real than its parts; traits more real than a complex, or a complex more real than its constituent traits; causes more real than effects, or effects more real than their causes; the physical more real than the ideal, or the ideal more real than the physical; the actual more real than the possible, or the possible more real than the actual; the fictional more or less real than the non-fictional. In a view that will have important implications for an understanding of human nature, an ontology of constitutive relations accepts no claim to ontological priority, i.e. that something is more real than something else. On the contrary, a relational ontology assumes an ontological parity among all complexes of every kind. To say that a complex is more or less real than its constituents would in fact be self-contradictory, since all constituent traits are themselves complexes, and all complexes are themselves constituent traits, a point that will be elaborated shortly. All complexes of any kind have whatever traits they have; all complexes have their own set of actualities and possibilities; each is efficacious in some respects or other. There is nothing more to the question of reality than that, and there is no meaning to degrees of reality at all. Complexes can be said to have degrees in other respects, for example a complex can be more or less relevant or important in some specified way, but it cannot be said to be more or less real. An ontological parity is a fundamental principle of an ontology of constitutive relations.[3]

For a relational ontology then we will avoid thinking of a complex as a container of traits, we will not assume that there is an overarching complex or system of reality, and we will reject the idea that some complexes are more real than others. These points now allow us to develop our definition of a relational ontology more positively. To do so we will introduce the concept of an "order," by which we mean a sphere of relatedness.

First, it is important to realize that every complex is an order of traits, which means that every complex *is* the specific web of relations of its constitutive traits. Every complex has innumerable traits, some more relevant to its character, some less. It is therefore difficult, perhaps even impossible, to provide an exhaustive list of a complex's traits. But even a short, representative list can help to illustrate the sense in which a complex is an order of traits. A specific tree, to use the same example as earlier, possesses physical traits at the subatomic, atomic, chemical and biological levels. Among its traits are its physical parts, but also among its traits are its chemical interactions with its environment. Also among its traits is its place in its broader physical context, for example whether it stands alone in a field, or is part of a stand of tress, or part of a forest. Its phylogenetic characterization is among its traits, as are the uses to which it might be put, whether by insects, birds, animals or human beings. All of these traits, and many others, converge or intersect to form the complex that is this specific tree. The tree is an order of traits, the sphere of relatedness of its many and varied constitutive traits. The same can be said of any other complex and any other kind of complex, whether it be a logical principle, a fictional character, a piece of technology, or a human being.

If a complex is an order of traits, it is also always itself a trait of some more comprehensive complex, which is to say that a complex is always located in some order or orders. A tree is a constitutive trait of the soil in which it grows, for example. In so far as it influences the chemical makeup of the air in its environment it is a trait of its atmosphere. Perhaps it is a part of a forest, in which case it is a constitutive trait of the forest. Or perhaps it is an object of veneration, in which case it enters into relations with human beings in a certain way and becomes a constitutive trait of a community's religious practices. It is an individual member of some class of tree, and therefore a constitutive trait of that class. In the case of the tree, it is a complex located in the orders of its atmosphere, a forest, a religious practice, and a species, and this short list is merely a representative sampling of the ordinal locations of the complex. Its ordinal locations are no doubt far more numerous.

The example of the tree is meant to be generalizable to any and all complexes. Every complex, then, is an order of traits, and is itself an ordinally located trait. It is obvious enough how a complex is an order of traits, but it may be less obvious why a complex must be located in at least one order. The reason is that the ordinal locations of a complex are among the traits that provide its character, its nature. Without ordinal location a complex has no contour, no character, which is to say that it is not a complex at all. This is an extremely important point. First, it indicates why, as we said earlier, there can be no such thing as an overarching complex that is reality or nature. Such a complex would not be ordinally located, and therefore would not be a complex. An unlocated complex is a contradiction in terms. Second, the ordinal locations of a complex, its integrities, are what provide the complex's identity as just the complex that it is. One of the persistent myths in philosophy of this kind, in systematic metaphysics, is that identity requires an absolute entity of some kind. The suspicion seems to be that if we allow an entity to be understood as the interrelations of its traits then it becomes difficult or impossible to ascribe an identity to it. But this suspicion is unwarranted. A complex must be located in orders of relations, and each ordinal location provides an integrity of the complex. The totality of a complex's ordinal locations is its contour. Such an understanding allows us to posit the complex's identity in the relation between its contour and any of its integrities. The continuity of a complex through time is thereby expressed, and in such a way that allows the recognition of ongoing identity through changes in a complex's ordinal locations. A complex can alter its traits while maintaining its identity.

Finally, these concepts and categories taken together help to avoid a good deal of unnecessary mystification concerning complexes. The identity and character of complexes is a function of its constitutive traits, including its ordinal locations. There is no mysterious ground of being required to understand this, nor is any source of being outside nature necessary. Complexes are what they are, they have the nature they have, by virtue of the relations among their many constituent traits, among which are their ordinal locations. With respect to any complex some of those traits and ordinal locations may involve human beings, but they also may not. In either case, the character of any complex is a matter of what we can call natural definition. A complex is what it is by virtue of the relations among the traits that constitute it.

Relational Man

We now turn to human being as understood in the context of an ontology of constitutive relations. In Anglo-American philosophy discussions of human being have dealt more than anything with the so-called "mind-body problem." This is a constellation of questions: Is a person a body and a mind? Are a mind and a body related? If so, how? Can a person be understood solely as a body? Can mental characteristics be reduced to physical characteristics? Is a person "essentially" a body or "essentially" a mind? How can a mind influence a body, or a body influence a mind? If a person is merely a complex body, how is intentionality possible? How can mind be studied? Can a person be genuinely creative, or is a person's behavior simply a complex response to physical causes or behavioral programming? Are minds to be understood by analogy with computers? Some of these are questions that have vexed philosophers for a long time, but in their standard formulation they are misguided and unnecessary.

First, from the perspective of a relational ontology there is no need to begin by assuming that there is an essential set of traits that *is* a person. There is no need to assume that a person really is a body, or really is a mind, for example. A person is the complex set of traits that constitute it, and of course the specific relations among those traits. One could offer at least a partial list of those traits, though that in itself would not be philosophically illuminating. Certainly a person has physical and mental traits. Our bodies have physical characteristics and react to physical stimuli. We think, speculate, decide, and perform a range of other mental activities. We also have emotional traits, and we have social traits. We have spiritual traits, religious aspirations and erotic impulses. We are to some extent political animals, as Aristotle had it, and we have economic motivations. We have ethical dimensions as well as aesthetic. A person is all of these things, to some degree or other.

The traditional approaches to understanding human nature, especially through the philosophical mind-body problem, have tended to try to assert some priority among these and other human traits. The assumption seems to have been that there must be something, some essential trait or subset of traits, that makes something a person, and that it is the philosopher's task to determine what that is. However, once we give up this assumption, and instead say that a person, like any other complex of nature, is constituted by the relations among its traits, many of the problems and questions of traditional philosophies of human nature, and certainly of the mind-body problem, become moot.

Among the most damaging, in fact perverse, aspects of traditional Anglo-American philosophy of mind, philosophy of human being has been its tendency to reductionism. Philosophers have relentlessly attempted to show that what seem to be rather obvious characteristics of human being are in fact illusory. Along these lines it has been argued that what appear to be mental characteristics can in fact be understood in purely physical terms, or that what appear to be volitions are in fact merely effects of physical or mental causes, or that what appear to be ethical judgments or commitments are in fact nothing other than the results of fairly complex behavioral conditioning. The tendency to reductionism, however, is analogous to the inclination at the level of systematic metaphysics to insist on ontological priority. But a relational ontology suggests that there is no good reason, in fact it is meaningless, to hold that some complexes or kinds of complexes are more real than others. Similarly, there is no good reason to assert or insist that some identifiable traits of human being are "really" something else: the mental really the physical, or the ethical really the behavioral, or the behavioral really the neuro-chemical. A relational ontology is a tolerant ontology, and it is no less tolerant with respect to human nature. The reductionist tendencies of mind-body philosophers are unnecessary and unfounded. We are fully justified in accepting as relevant any and all traits of a person that can be observed, described or articulated. In fact we are able to appreciate more fully the range of traits that constitute a person, and by implication the complexity and richness of human life, when we avoid reductionism and accept at more or less face value the fact that a person, like any other complex, is constituted by numerous traits of various kinds in a range of relations with one another. An ontology of constitutive relations provides the conceptual categories through which such a view of human being is plausible, intelligible and fruitful.

One of the reasons philosophers have wanted to locate some kind of essential character or trait of human beings, whether it be mental, physical or spiritual, is the prevalent assumption that identity requires an absolute, i.e. non-relational, ground, or to use older metaphysical language, a substance of some kind. Without some sort of unique, even atomistic entity, for example mind or spirit, many philosophers have thought, there would be no way to ascribe identity, no way to individuate a particular person. Materialists, at least of the reductionist variety, have been content to ascribe identity to a complex physical entity, a body, which despite its changes over time, can nonetheless serve to individuate persons. This materialist approach to identity is interesting, in part because in fact it entertains, though in too narrow a way, an important point: identity does not require an absolute entity. The materialist's mistake has been to combine this insight with its reductionism, whereby he insists that rather obvious human characteristics such as mental activity must really be something physical. When shorn of this unjustified and stultifying approach, however, a more sensible understanding of identity emerges. Just as a complex human body can be individuated despite constant change over time, and given the relational nature of material traits, it is equally possible to ascribe identity to human individuals when their more varied traits are introduced. In other words, personal identity in all its richness can be posited in the ongoing relation between the ordinal locations of its traits, i.e. its integrities, and its gross integrity or contour. The many traits of an individual, indeed an individual's life as a whole, prevail in numerous orders of relations. Like any other complex, the specific sets of relations of a given human individual are its identity, and allow for its individuation. No absolute entity is necessary, nor is it useful or necessary to analyze away its complexity.

So far, we have suggested the plausibility of understanding a person in terms of the categories of a general relational ontology. But how, we may ask, does this help us to understand what is distinctive about human beings? What, at the most general level, is uniquely characteristic of human complexes as opposed to other kinds? Much can be said about this, and much has already been said.[4] For example, all temporal complexes prevail through some period of time, but individual human lives do not merely persist through time, rather they have a trajectory. Persons do not simply act and react, nor do they simply undergo. Rather, humans experience and they judge. Complexes that merely act and react, or merely undergo, accumulate events, all of which are more or less relevant to their overall character or identity. For persons, by contrast, experience is cumulative; it confers on a person's life a direction, a trajectory. The trajectory of a person's life is not necessarily unidirectional, nor, presumably, is it preordained. It is rather, the cumulative experience of that which a person undergoes and that which a person does.

Furthermore, persons act in ways that are, as far as we can tell, different from the ways in which most other advanced animals act. Specifically, they judge, which is to say they select. There are, it would appear, other very advanced animals that also select, but persons do so in far more sophisticated ways. Human judgment, whether it be assertive, exhibitive or active, manipulates other complexes of the world, other elements of experience, for reasons and to achieve specific ends. In many cases the ends of judgments, and the means of judgment through which those ends are achieved, are unique to persons. Persons can manipulate complexes in order to solve mundane problems, but then so too can many other animals. Other animals, however, do not render judgments in order, for example, to understand or to express. And other animals do not assert in the sophisticated ways that humans can, for example in literature and philosophy, nor do they exhibit with the depth that persons do through painting or music. Experience and judgment are distinctive, cumulative, and constitutive traits of the person.

It is possible to select from countless common aspects of human experience to illustrate the way traits of human experience are constitutive of a distinctly human life. We could choose to consider various examples of judgment, for example, or we could focus on conditions in which persons find themselves and their responses to them. We have chosen to consider, by way of illustration of the way traits are constitutive of persons, the example of absence.

Part II

Absence and the Human Constitution

An illustration of the relational character of human being is the role of absence in experience. Absence can be understood in various ways and one of the possible interpretations of absence is rooted in Justus Buchler's conception of possibility, in which case absence has a relational character.

Buchler views the notions of actuality and possibility as inevitable categories in terms of which to understand any complex, therefore necessary to understand human being. According to Buchler, every actuality has limits that represent its possibilities; sometimes they are called "powers" or "potentialities" (Buchler 1990, 42). However, possibility is not to be understood as incomplete or insufficient or "deficiently actual" (to use Whitehead's term) in comparison with actuality. As possibility it is complete and self-sufficient regardless of its actualization. Treating possibilities as certain kinds of conditions for actualities and — taken together with actualities — as conditions of the "natural definition" of the boundaries or limits of a natural complex,[5] Buchler distinguishes potentiality and power.[6] For him they are possibilities that are mainly thought of as prevalent rather than alescent, and they belong to complexes regarded as agential, i.e. to individuals and associations of individuals.

If we consider agents, i.e. human beings, as natural complexes and ascribe to them boundaries defined by actualities and possibilities, including potentialities and/or powers, then the question arises what happens to a human being when some of his necessarily actualized potentialities, which, according to Buchler's definition, prevail as members of a family or group, not only remain non-actualized but are eliminated from the area of possible actualization? For example, we can view as necessarily actualized potentialities of human being the functions connected with his biological structure, such as walking, running, jumping, watching, hearing, etc., or such specific functions as communication with the help of language, i.e. talking, reading, writing, etc. In the absence of a biological organ with a certain function, how is the integrity of such a natural complex, i.e. human being, achieved? A man without legs, of course, can be considered a human being because other characteristic traits of the natural complex "human being" prevail over such actual traits as possession of two legs. However, the absence of legs questions his ability to function like a physically normal person and includes him in the order of invalids. In Russian literature of the socialist realist period there is a novel about a pilot during World War II who, having lost both his legs, suffers from this absence and tries to adapt to his new situation. The absence of legs becomes the stimulus for him and determines, first, the character's repossession of the lost functions, such as running, dancing, piloting an aircraft, and second, the formation through regaining those functions (actualities, or prevalent constituents, of a natural complex "human being") of a new identity in accordance with a previous one — the identity of a "real man" (the title of this Soviet novel is *Story of a Real Man*). Being marginalized, being transferred from the order of physically normal people to the order of invalids, the character, pilot Alexej Meresjev, who was in fact a historical person, returns to the order he is expelled from not only due to the regained functions (at the end of the novel he runs, dances a waltz, pilots an aircraft and fights against the Nazis in World War II), but because the absence of his legs increases the process of his self-formation, which is interpreted in the novel as the process of hyper-humanization. In this particular case we can say that an individual complex of the individual described was constituted, though partially, by a lack or absence of one of the generic class of actualities (actualized potentialities) of the complex.

Let us have a closer look at another kind of possibility or potentiality, which can be constituent in a situation of non-actualization. In the instance of the Soviet pilot such a trait of the complex as the possession of two legs with certain functions is an attributive characteristic of the complex based on physical potency. Moreover, the capacity for walking in an upright position is one of the more common attributes of *Homo sapiens*. Among the attributes of agential natural complexes are its predicative characteristics or traits based on the social aspect of its existence. For example, the prevailing potentiality for a person of a certain nationality is the ability to speak his native language. However, when living outside the country or community of the native language the potentiality of speaking the language of another nationality can be actualized. This fact may or may not influence the national identity of a person. Consider an Armenian, a person whose national identity is strongly influenced by knowledge of the native language whether he lives in Armenia or in the Diaspora, and imagine a situation where an Armenian in the Diaspora who does not speak Armenian and, realizing it as a defect, does his best to keep his Armenian identity (i.e. to be in an order of Armenians). In this case we will have an example of the natural complex where absence, i.e. of the ability to speak Armenian, is actualized and therefore becomes an important constituent factor of the complex.

The third and the last example is a case of an imposter or an “as if personality,” which usually falls in the same category as an imposter. An imposter, a person who adopts another’s identity or rank, and an “as if personality,” both demonstrate insufficiency of their own identity, i.e. some lack or absence of vitally important traits that they try to mask or to overcome with the help of the personality whose traits and way of behavior they mimic and imitate. An imposter and an “as if personality,” if they are viewed as natural complexes, do not actualize the potentialities either prevalent or alescent in their own complexes, but change the orders they are in for the order of another personality. They just “move” into a new ordinal location. However, neither an imposter nor an “as if personality” reject completely the orders they were in. There is a kind of gap between their previous and present state, between true and false identity — the “trace” in Derrida’s terminology that signals the presence of absence. Thus the example shows, like the previous ones, the constitutional character of a lack. The notion of a lack and distance between true and false identities distinguish an imposter and an “as if personality” from pathological cases of complete loss of the previous identity, when the notion of a lack and distance are not experienced.

The given examples share an actualized presence of absence, though viewed in different aspects: as a lack or absence of a physical (the case of a man with his legs amputated), or social (the case of an Armenian who does not speak Armenian), or individual (the case of an imposter or "as if personality") potency of an agential natural complex "human being" that is, consequently, constitutional on the level of biological, social or individual organization.

Buchler claims that complexes differ in their "potentialities," which like powers are kinds of possibilities and, therefore, complexes differ in their possibilities (Buchler 1990, 141). At the same time the encounter with a possibility itself is an *actuality* (Ibid, 149). As a result Buchler comes to the conclusion that "a potentiality is not an actuality; but the 'possession' of a potentiality, say by a living creature, is an actuality" (Ibid, 152). Thus the possession of such potentialities as walking or speaking the native language, and the possession of a national identity, are actualities. It is then logical to suggest that the absence of such "possession" is an actuality as well, but one that does not necessarily generate a separate complex. According to Buchler, we can never determine where the boundaries of the order precisely lie, but that does not mean that there are none. Buchler states that "wherever there is commensurateness or mediability of traits, there is an order or complex" (Ibid, 97), and where commensurateness ceases, there is the limit of an order. The principle of commensurateness as it is presented by Buchler means that no complex is relevant to (determinative of) every other. For this reason the absence of the "possession" of certain potentialities is not an independent complex as long as it is commensurate with and mediates with the other traits of the complex. If we regard the identity of a complex as "the continuous relation that obtains between the contour of a complex and any of its integrities" (Ibid, 22), and view a contour as made up of constituents, which affect its value, then it is necessary to include actualized absence or an actualized lack of potentiality into the score of the integrities that shape the contour.

Buchler is known to have several common points in his conception of natural possibility with Nicholas Rescher. Thus, for Buchler a system of rules and specifications constitute the boundaries of the order within which the statements are free of contradiction, as contradictory actualities cannot prevail in the same order (Ibid, 138). Rescher on his part distinguishes strong and weak contradictions and argues against the capacity of strong contradiction[7] to be an ontological foundation of a world picture (Rescher 1988, 75). Yet Rescher is criticized for understanding reference to the possible as reference to the hypothetical and, hence, for ignoring the notion of casual connection as fundamental to dispositions. Rescher's appeal to hypothetic possibility differentiates him from Buchler, for whom the notion of cause is linked with the notion of natural possibilities (Weiss 1991, 152).[8] Still Rescher has some advantage due to the system of micro-worlds he uses in his analysis. For Rescher a "micro-world" is, for example, an actual world with three properties: F, G, and H, and two individuals x_1 and x_2, and gives for them the following canonical descriptions: 'x_1 is the H which does not have G' and 'x_2 is the H which does have G' (Rescher 1975, 46—63; cited: Weiss 1991, 153—154). This is an example of hypothetical actuality. According to Rescher, possible individuals are constructed by logically permitted combinations, while possible worlds are constructed by logically and metaphysically permitted combinations of possible individuals, and then possibilities are just permitted combinations. Rescher's conception, though it does not coordinate actualities and possibilities, takes into consideration the constitutional character of absence in the world of possibilities lacking in Buchler's conception of natural possibility.

In the psychoanalytical tradition represented by Jacques Lacan's interpretation of Sigmund Freud's works (e.g. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*), absence or a lack constitute human experience initiating the desire for that which one lacks. For Lacan the first step in development of subjectiveness is desire; what precedes subjectiveness is pure absence. When a lack is visible or absence is felt, then it provides for the constitution or self-formation of the subject who is aware of the lack or absence. In Freud's famous analysis of his grandson's playing with a toy and greeting its comings and goings with the words *Fort! Da!*, the realization of absence or loss constitutes the subject of the *Fort! Da!* game. In Lacan's interpretation the subject (Freud's grandson) is expelled from the subjectivity of total presence.[9] According to Wilden, "Lacan sees this phonemic opposition as directly related not to any specific German words but rather to the binary opposition of presence and absence in the child's world" (Wilden 1968, 163). Lacan argues that the "lack of object" is a gap in the signifying chain that the subject is to fill at the level of signifier.[10] Speech is viewed as an attempt to fill gaps without which the speech could not be articulated and hence is connected with the notion of a lack, as in the theory of desire. Freud's grandson in his game substitutes the lack of object (at one level of interpretation it is the mother's breast; at another, the mother's comings and goings), on the one hand, with words, with speech; on the other hand, with a toy (which is considered to substitute for the more primordial object).

The relationship between fantasy, signifier, and absence is basic for Lacan's theory of desire. However, there are two principal versions of absence rooted in a lack of the primordial object. The first type is absence of an object or a subject, which is different from the subject of perception (the mother, a toy in a child's perception). The second type is absence or a lack of the part of a subject of perception himself. In the first case we deal with different natural complexes. In the second case we deal with a lack within the contour of the same natural complex.[11] The lack of the object in the Lacanian sense can also be interpreted as castration. Castration is a lack within the same agential order or natural complex. If we turn back to the literary examples then a lack of physical potency caused by the loss of some organ, like the loss of legs by a Soviet pilot Meresjev or the loss of the nose in a story of the 19th century Russian writer Nikolaj Gogol', serves more or less as representations of castration. The struggle of a castrated individual for prevalence in the order of physically normal people reflects the universal subconscious castration anxiety.

The notion of a lack within the contour of the same agential natural complex "human being" as a constituent of the complex correlates with the ideas of German philosophical anthropologists, in the first place, of Arnold Gehlen and of Helmuth Plessner. Yet for Max Scheler, a pioneer of philosophical anthropology, man begins with general and universal self-negation represented by the dreams of a new-born child (Scheler 1994). Thus, the creation of a human being originates in absence. Helmuth Plessner too held that human being is characterized by a lack or deficit, which in turn serves as a stimulus for the person's activity and the trajectory of his experience. Thus, he listed as the most important characteristics of a person such negative characteristics (minus-qualities) as instability, biological insufficiency, and historical incompleteness. The notion of deficit or a lack within his bodily being is given to man by the "eccentric position" he occupies. Plessner asserted that while animals live out of the center of their bodily being, men live out of and into the center of their bodily beings.[12] Though, due to self-reflection, they are also the center itself. The dual position of a human being — in the center of bodily being and out of it — is the "eccentric position." Living out of the center of bodily being, like animals do, does not allow the creation of a meta-position; hence, only a human being is self-reflexive (his self-consciousness is *regressus ad infinitum*). Though distancing himself from his bodily being, man possesses it (*Medium*) as an environment (*Umfeld*). Man is positionless (out of place — *ortlos* and out of time — *zeitlos*) and, for this reason, is capable of experiencing his bodily existence together with experiencing positionlessness in general. As a result, man discovers a lack within himself. According to Plessner, any living being, including man, is characterized by the initial dissatisfaction (*Unerfulltheit*); satisfaction is achieved merely by crossing a gap (*uber eine Kluft hinweg*). However, only man reflects on his dissatisfaction.

Arnold Gehlen too argued that the person is characterized by "die Hemmbarkeit und die Verschiebbarkeit der Bedürfnisse und Interessen" and, therefore, is constituted by the deficit of those qualities or traits that he has suppressed. Deficit is of attraction for Gehlen's human being. Though several researchers before Gehlen (for example, Herder in his *Ideen zur Geschichte der Menschhei*", 1784—1791) pointed out the deficit character of man, only Gehlen treated deficit as an ontological quality, which is constant and impossible for human being to overcome or to fill in. For Gehlen all the achievements of a human being demonstrate his initial universal insufficiency. Individual insufficiency in this respect continues the line of universal insufficiency of an embryonic structure of a human being. Distinct from animals, man acts with the help of noninstinctive planned movements and, therefore, is capable of actualizing potencies he possesses and is conscious of. The eccentric position of man, in the terms of Plessner and participated by Gehlen, generates planned movements aimed at achieving goals in prospective situations. Gehlen interprets a human "soul" as a kind of gap, which postpones realization of human needs and desires. Postponed needs and desires can be satisfied later or remain unsatisfied. Non-realization of any desire increases the general notion of dissatisfaction inherent in human being and creates a lack that can be interpreted as constituent for Gehlen's human being.

While in the works of Lacan, Plessner, and Gehlen absence or lack create some kind of discomfort and conflict, Buchler's conception of natural complexes with the formulation of concepts of prevalence and alescence suggests a reconciliation of any kind of conflict that arises. There is no contradiction and competition among complexes — just difference in prevalence and alescence of their traits: "A complex is prevalent in so far as it excludes traits from its contour. A complex is alescent in so far as it admits traits into its contour" (Buchler 1990, 56). Buchler argues against Alfred North Whitehead's atomic theory of "ultimate actualities": "No natural complex can be a metaphysical atom" (Ibid, 51). However, the conception of change proposed by Whitehead should be taken seriously. According to Whitehead, the goal of philosophy is to consider objects as processes and to reflex change. Whitehead's theory demonstrates the relational character of every element in respect to the system and in respect to the alescent innovation of the system. For Buchler, though, process is also "distinctly a human movement, derived phenomenologically from an awareness of man as he is in-the-process of revealing himself" (Gelber 1991, 25). Moreover, sometimes, according to Buchler, a process prevails "not as against another kind of process, but against the absence of process, the absence of traits such as continuation and recurrence" (Buchler 1990, 54). The inclusion of the idea of continuation and process into the metaphysics of natural complexes puts Buchler very close to the ideas of self-organization developed 13 years later (in 1979) by Ilya Prigogine. As maintained by Prigogine, the majority of complex systems (natural complexes in Buchler's metaphysics) are open (there are no strictly defined boundaries or limits of an order in Buchler's metaphysics) and the openness of the systems causes their misbalance and instability. As a result of constant fluctuation of subsystems (sub-complexes) the system (a natural complex) may come into a state of chaos and disorganization. Nonetheless the chaotic and misbalanced structure of a complex system may then create an order consequent to the process of self-organization. Hence, chaos is the most productive state of becoming and new being. Absence or a lack create a break in the order and initiate fluctuations; therefore, within the natural complex "human being", for instance, they lead to chaos. However, chaos initiates the process of self-organization. In the case of human being it turns into the process of self-consciousness and self-formation. Absence or a lack within the same agential natural complex "human being" puts a human being into a patient position of an object suffering from the insufficiency. But then absence or a lack commences the process of self-consciousness, and self-formation as personality is imparted to the Self by the comprehension of his objectiveness (Smirnov 1999, 32).

The realization of absence or a lack is an act of eccentric transgression of the boundaries of the system because it makes the Self differentiate the order he belonged to and the order he will belong in case of impossibility to compensate a lack. Thus, a lack excludes the Self from the former system and requires either adaptation to the new conditions of existence or to self-transformation. The primordial memory of “the non-relationship of zero, where identity is meaningless” (Wilden 168, 191) causes the eternal desire of a human being for “oneness” and “wholeness”, and hence makes him seek intimacy at different levels of his self-organization (physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual) as a possibility to overcome his personal insufficiency, both real (biological) and imaginary.

Bibliography

Buchler, J. *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, 2nd Edition, eds. Kathleen Wallace and Armen Marsoobian, with Robert S. Corrington, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990.

Buchler, J. *Toward a General Theory of Human Judgment*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1951.

Buchler, J. *Nature and Judgment*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1955.

Gelber, S. “Toward a Radical Naturalism”. In: *Nature’s Perspectives: Prospects for Ordinal Metaphysics*. Albany, 1991. P. 21—27.

Lacan, Jacques. *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*. Baltimore, 1968.

von Leibniz, G.W. *Basic Writings*, La Salle. IL: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1986

Plessner, H. *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*. Berlin, 1928.

Plessner, H. *Laughing and Crying. A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior*. Evanston, 1970.

Prigogine, I. and Stengers, I. *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue With Nature*. New York, 1984.

Randall, J. H. Jr., "The Nature of Metaphysics: Its Function, Criteria, and Method," Chapter 5 of *Nature and Historical Experience*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1962.

Rescher, N. *Rationality*. Oxford, 1988.

Rescher, N. *A Theory of Possibility*. Pittsburgh, 1975.

Scheler, M. *Schriften zur Anthropologie*. Stuttgart, 1994.

Smirnov, Igor'. *Homo homini philosophus*… St. Petersburg, 1999.

Weiss, P. "Possibility: Three Recent Ontologies". In: *Nature's Perspectives: Prospects for Ordinal Metaphysics*. Albany, 1991. P. 145—169.

Whitehead, A. N. *Process and Reality*. New York, 1929.

Wilden, A. "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other". In: Lacan, Jacques. *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*. Baltimore, 1968. P. 159—311.

Wittgenstein, L. *Notebooks, 1914—1916*, ed. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969.

NOTES

---

[1] Throughout Part I we are describing in general outline the ideas more thoroughly developed by Justus Buchler, primarily in Buchler 1990.

[2] On this particular point see Justus Buchler, "On the Concept of 'the World'," reprinted in Buchler 1990, pp. 224-259

[3] The principle of ontological parity, though developed in detail by Buchler in *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, was anticipated by John Herman Randall Jr. (1962, 121-142). It should be pointed out as well

---

that Randall also anticipates Buchler's idea that there is no world or nature as a single whole in "Empirical Pluralisms and Unifications of Nature," which appears as Chapter 7 of the same book, pp. 195-214

[4] For a "metaphysics of human being" of this type see Justus Buchler 1951 and 1955.

[5] "<…> the traits of a complex define its contour (or, delineate a contour), and those [subaltern] traits which define or chart the 'prospect before it' are its possibilities" (Buchler 1990, 162); "We cannot say that a possibility is what 'limits' a complex; what limits it is the order of complexes in which it is located. And within this order, both possibilities and actualities are factors in the 'limiting'" (Ibid, 169).

[6] A potentiality is representative, and it is discriminated as prevailing because of its representative status. It is a possibility in a family of possibilities. A power is a possibility that is discriminated as prevailing because of its unrepresentative status (Buchler 1990, 171172). "<...> the emphasis on the possibility being a power rather than a potentiality is the emphasis on its idiosyncratic or relatively unique aspect. <…> an acorn has the potentiality of becoming an oak, but not that it has the potentiality of scarring a toad on which it falls – this would have to be a power belonging to the acorn" (Ibid, 172).

[7] Strong contradiction is the situation wherein the significance of *p* is *p* and *(—p)* simultaneously.

[8] Rescher develops the conception of actual individuals and their properties; he claims that properties "must admit of exemplification, but they need not be exemplified" (Rescher 1975, 6). By that statement he equates properties with pure possibilities that may or may not be actualized (exemplified) (Weiss 1991, 151). According to Rescher, a property may actually characterize an individual, it may be essential to an individual, or it may be a possible property of an individual.

[9] As indicated by Wilden, Lacan's interpretation is close to Sartre's notion of desire as a lack and based on the common source — Alexander Kojeve (Wilden 1968, 192).

[10] "Through the word – already a presence made of absence – absence itself comes to giving itself a name in that moment of origin whose perpetual recreation Freud's genius detected in the play of the child" (Lacan 1968, 39).

[11] The non-differentiation of these types of absence or, to be more precise, the non-differentiation of a lack as a constituent of a natural complex caused such rhetorical questions by Buchler as: "Is a male "deficiently female" and a female "deficiently male? Is a society "deficiently individual"? If so, should an individual not be considered "deficiently social"?" (Buchler 1990, 50). Buchler argues against using a lack or deficit as a distinguishing characteristic of the pair of concepts — natural complexes that are close to an opposition. However binary oppositions are far from popularity anyway. Yet marking a lack within the same order is of importance.

[12] Plessner, as well as later Buchler, is against body/soul or body/mind opposition – the model, fashioned by Descartes, which prevented "the reconciliation between man as a natural thing and man as a moral and intellectual being" (Plessner 1970, 29).