

## Reconsidering the exclusion of metaphysics in human geography

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### 1. Introduction

From its beginning as a systematic branch of knowledge, human geography was strongly influenced by developments in the other branches of the social sciences. Once a predominantly descriptive and ideographic discipline, human geography gradually took on a more positivist methodology. This in turn gave way to a series of approaches which included marxist, humanist and more recently postmodernist perspectives. As with similar paradigm shifts in other fields of knowledge, changes in geography were often attempts to deal with the deficiencies and criticisms of previous methodological and philosophical approaches. Because human geography emerged along with the social sciences, it was associated with the movement to distance scientific knowledge from metaphysical issues. From Descartes on a consensus emerged to exclude metaphysical questions as a necessary step towards the development of truly scientific disciplines. Within geography this view drew support from the influence of Kant and later on from the particularly hostile view of metaphysics held by the positivists of the Vienna Circle. Positivism was to take a firm grip on the development of human geography, moulding it to become "spatial science".

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Since the 1970s, a number of different approaches have provided a strong critique of positivist geography. Humanist geography in various forms attempted to counter the strongly deterministic perspectives on humanity presented by positivist and marxist influences. Some of these approaches have touched on the neglect of ontological issues, yet to date they have failed to examine the effect on the discipline of excluding a metaphysical perspective. The most recent development of postmodern geography, while it presents a strong critique of positivist geography, and argues for a greater tolerance of "difference", is nevertheless still quite hostile towards the possibility of incorporating a metaphysical perspective within human geography. This paper suggests the need to reconsider the exclusion of a metaphysical perspective in human geography, if the discipline is to make a more effective contribution towards helping policy makers deal with the many grave issues facing humanity.

## 2. Metaphysics and modern thought

Parmenides, the most significant of all pre-Socratic philosophers, who lived at the end of the sixth century and in the first half of the fifth, is known as the father of metaphysics<sup>1</sup>. Up until his time, Greek speculation had been cosmological, physical, with a philosophic purpose and method. In the hands of Parmenides philosophy comes to be metaphysics and ontology, through which he sought to distinguish opinion and belief from knowledge. Among the various types of metaphysical theory which have emerged since the time of Parmenides are Platonism, Aristotelianism, Thomism, Cartesianism, Idealism and Materialism.

Metaphysics can be taken as that central part of philosophy whose object is to determine the real nature of things, challenging all assumptions and determining the meaning, structure and principles of whatever is insofar as it is<sup>2</sup>. It is that science which seeks to define what is ultimately real, as opposed to what is apparent. Many scientists have restricted themselves to what can be dealt with in quantitative terms, which can be a poor reflection of the richness of everyday life. People experience the world at different levels and in different capacities. They are not only researchers but also agents. They live morally, legally, aesthetically and religiously as well as scientifically. One cannot separate the practice of geography from the scholar's total

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<sup>1</sup> J. Marías, *History of Philosophy*, Dover, New York 1967, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> B. W. Wilshire, *Metaphysics*, in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Chicago 1994, vol. 24, pp. 1-26.

being<sup>3</sup>. Humans are multi-faceted beings and need to understand the universe in the light of their different activities and experiences.

In contrast to specialised disciplines which study reality in part, metaphysics aspires to deal with the world as a whole. According to Plato it offers a synoptic view of reality, arising from the need to see things in a holistic way and to avoid the narrowness of the specialist. In the 1920s Scheler noted that we lacked a unified idea of human being and that the multiplicity of special sciences tends to hide rather than to reveal the nature of human being<sup>4</sup>. One can argue that geography, with its traditional claim to holism, and as the bridging discipline between the natural and social sciences, has much to gain from metaphysical perspectives.

For Schumacher metaphysics and ethics deal with our most basic convictions, issues such as the meaning and purpose of life, and the fact that all human life strives after something thought of as good. These are the ideas with the power to move us, "ideas that transcend the world of facts, that cannot be proved or disproved by ordinary scientific methods"<sup>5</sup>. This does not mean that they are merely "subjective" or "relative", since they have to be true to reality.

Human geography and the social sciences in general constantly grapple with fundamental issues to do with the nature of humanity. Humanistic geography, in particular, has the objective of "bringing human beings in all their complexity to the centre stage of human geography"<sup>6</sup>. These sciences expressly refuse to ask and answer the ultimate questions of human existence. Metaphysics, however, addresses aspects of humanity beyond the empirical, and at the same time tries to give meaning to the empirical realm and to make sense of empirical data. Metaphysics takes from the various branches of knowledge its basic data about humanity and then provides a synthesising framework in which to open up the perspective of values and ends<sup>7</sup>. The social sciences correctly adopt the methodological position that limits their area of competence. There is no reason why this should result in an attitude of exclusion towards the metaphysical perspective, which is open to the ethical and spiritual

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<sup>3</sup> A. Buttner, *Values in Geography*, Association of American Geographers Resource Paper n° 24, Washington 1974.

<sup>4</sup> M. Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature*, Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, New York 1961, pp. 8-34.

<sup>5</sup> E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, Abacus, London 1974, p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> P. Cloke, C. Philo and D. Sadler, *Approaching Human Geography*, Paul Chapman, London 1991, p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, Message, 5.IX.80, quoted in L. Clavell, "The Need for Metaphysics", *Catholic Position Papers*, n° 136, May 1986, Asiya-Shi, p. 4.

dimensions of humanity. It is precisely the excluding or ignoring of this perspective which has resulted in deterministic and reductionist conceptualisations of humanity continuing to influence geography and the social sciences.

It is generally agreed that Descartes' philosophy marks the beginning of the development of the exact and natural sciences as well as the humanistic sciences in their systematic form. He turned his back on metaphysics and concentrated on the philosophy of knowledge. Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" became the motto of modern rationalism, and introduced the great anthropocentric shift in European thought. The Cartesian dualism placed epistemology at centre stage instead of metaphysics. The development of new disciplines such as geography coincided with the exclusion of metaphysics and it has been argued that such an exclusion was a necessary element in the "scientific" development of geography<sup>8</sup>.

Within philosophy itself, there was increasing unease with the suggestion that metaphysics was the first philosophical discipline —"the queen of the sciences"—and with the implication that it had the last word about what goes on in all other branches of knowledge<sup>9</sup>. Before Descartes it had been widely held that it was the business of metaphysics to justify the ultimate assumptions of sciences and that in metaphysics alone there were no unjustified assumptions. Such a view was partly responsible for the growing hostility towards metaphysics, and the rejection of the widely held view that metaphysics was superior to other disciplines. By the seventeenth century the term "metaphysics" had been discredited through its vaunted use by the rationalists who had constructed abstract systems of ideas divorced from experience. Since then metaphysics has been slandered and misrepresented. Despite the occasional association with New Age thinking in recent times, metaphysics has no special relation with religion.

### 3. Positivism and rejection of metaphysics

The sharpest attack on metaphysical speculation in the twentieth century was came from the school of "positive" philosophy of Auguste Comte, who in the nineteenth century had presented metaphysical thought as a necessary, but now superseded, stage in the progression of the human mind from primitive superstition

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<sup>8</sup> R. Butlin, *Human Geography*, «Geographical Viewpoint», 1 (1965), pp. 59-67.

<sup>9</sup> B. W. Wilshire, o. c., pp. 4-5.

to modern science. While Livingstone sees no clear link between Comptean philosophy and modern geography he points to a clear connection with twentieth century positivists. During the second half of the present century the mainstream of philosophy in Western culture was dominated by Logical Positivism. Livingstone explains the emergence of this movement, as an attempt to overcome the philosophical difficulties associated with the conception of science which had prevailed since the seventeenth century<sup>10</sup>. According to this view all science was based on the empirical observation of nature, and by analysing the data, formulating hypotheses and testing them against reality it was held that universal laws could be uncoded. This analysis of Logical Positivists, however, was itself not philosophically neutral: they saw metaphysics as the enemy of science and the only way to understand the world, in their view, was in scientific terms. Metaphysics was not valid knowledge but merely an expression of human feelings or aspirations.

The verification principle was the main weapon against metaphysics. The only statements that had meaning were those which could be verified by scientific methods. Positivists experienced great difficulty, however, in devising a logically satisfactory formulation of the verification principle. It was what logicians call a "self-referentially incoherent thesis". That is to say the principle itself fails to follow its own precept: to make the claim "only sentences which are verifiable have meaning" is itself not tenable in any scientific way. This was acknowledged quite early on by A. J. Ayer, professor of logic at Oxford, even if social scientists did not realise it. For them it simply became a sort of flag for "scientific" social research. The realisation that supposedly objective observations were not themselves free from theory brought logical positivism under scrutiny. Its self-imposed limitation to sense-perceptible data also disables it from providing a satisfactory explanation of many aspects of human life, including scientific knowledge itself.

While Logical Positivism is now defunct, the deference of Logical Positivists to empirical science created "an intellectual climate inimical to the pursuit of speculative metaphysics"<sup>11</sup>. Lowe is strongly critical of the philosophical naivety of many scientists, who, unaware of the metaphysical assumptions in their own works, display a contempt for philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular.

It could be argued that within geography, there was a greater openness to all dimensions of human existence before a strongly positivist methodological

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<sup>10</sup> D. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition*, Blackwell, Oxford 1992, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> E. J. L. Lowe, *Metaphysics, opposition to*, in T. Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1995, p. 559.

perspective took hold. The growing influence of positivism during this century meant that geography has shared with other branches of knowledge the desire of absolute independence from any metaphysical knowledge. This independence has proved difficult to attain.

Logical positivism's influence on geography reached a high point in the 1960s and 1970s during the period termed the "quantitative revolution". Cartesian thinking changed it from being a largely descriptive, though culturally sensitive discipline, to becoming focused on the sophisticated quantitative analysis of variables for which data were either readily available or easily measured. Like other social scientists, geographers settled for explaining 30 per cent of the variability of large census datasets, without wondering too much about the 70 per cent which was left unexplained.

Tracing the early history of quantification, Livingstone questioned its claim to objectivity because social and political interests affected the methodology<sup>12</sup>. The reductionist and methodological assumptions that pervade quantitative analysis resulted in an approach weak in social criticism. As well as the ontological reductionism associated with this approach there is a danger of suppressing humankind's "existential awareness" and "moral nature". Contemporary culture is dominated by the methods and thought patterns of the natural sciences, and is strongly influenced by currents of philosophy which proclaim the principle of verification as the sole basis of truth. The effect of this exclusively scientific and non-metaphysical mindset is to limit the attention of contemporary society to only those positive realities which appear useful in quantitative and technical terms. Only in more recent times has an awareness of the untenability of the assumption of science's ethical and cognitive neutrality become more widespread.

In his *Small is Beautiful*, Schumacher put forward a critique of the exclusion of metaphysics from contemporary thinking and argued strongly in favour of its re-integration. In a time when science is ever more triumphant, he saw the greater part of existentialist philosophy displaying estrangement, loneliness, despair and cynicism. Schumacher called for a highlighting of metaphysics, because in its absence science was being taught without any awareness of the presuppositions of science. He was particularly concerned that economics was being taught without any awareness of the view of human nature that underlies economic theory. He further

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<sup>12</sup> D. Livingstone, o. c., p. 324.

argued that a subject that does not make explicit its view of human nature could hardly be called humanistic.

The Vienna Circle defined themselves as "scientists" rather than "humanists" and for them metaphysics represented a conservative heritage incapable of assimilating the philosophical impact of scientific revolutions<sup>13</sup>. MacIntyre, however, notes that with the failure of the Enlightenment, the twentieth century has found itself in the most radical ethical despair. MacIntyre sees twentieth century culture deprived of any widely shared rational morality<sup>14</sup>. Various non-transcendent forms have emerged including positivism, Marxist materialism and postmodernism, all of which have had a significant impact on the evolution of human geography.

## 5. Back to Kant

In any attempt to restore a metaphysical perspective to human geography, a useful starting point is to return to Kant. In addition to being one of the great philosophers of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) also taught geography at Koenigsberg for thirty years. Kant has the distinction in geography of being the source of both ideographic and nomothetic approaches in the discipline, and his *Critique of Pure Reason* has been described as providing a springboard for postmodernity<sup>15</sup>.

Humanistic geography in the 1970s, in seeking a return to the centrality of experience, meaning and the subjective, and in order to develop an alternative to the predominant positive approach, turned to Kant as a source of inspiration. These authors have also argued that the transcendental critical philosophy of Kant could provide a philosophical foundation for a contemporary human geography seeking an understanding of the world through an understanding of self. One of the key ideas of Kant which has been widely retained, is that we can only make sense of the world by imposing some structure originating from the mind on it. He made a fundamental distinction between rational and empirical sciences and saw geography

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<sup>13</sup> G. Borradori, *The American Philosopher*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> A. MacIntyre, *Nietzsche or Aristotle?* in G. Borradori, o. c., p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> D. N. Livingstone and R. T. Harrison, *Immanuel Kant, Subjectivism, and Human Geography: A Preliminary Investigation*, «Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers», New Series 6 (1981) pp. 359-374; Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*, Blackwell, Cambridge 1994, p. 143.

as a vehicle for unifying our understanding of the world, as a synoptic discipline synthesising the findings of other disciplines.

According to Kant, the ultimate philosophical question is "what is man?". The human being is distinguishable from, and elevated above all other creatures by virtue of possessing self-consciousness. Human being is aware of himself as an "I", as distinct from everything outside his own consciousness, and because he possesses the notion "I" each human being is a person. It is character in the moral sense of self-awareness that radically distinguishes the human being from nature. The human being's destiny is to overcome the rawness of nature, and to realise one's rationality through the development of good out of "evil" by one's action<sup>16</sup>.

The Kantian philosophical framework, therefore, contributes towards the reinstatement of the human being as the creator of his own world through the active participation of the knowing subject in that which is known. The similarity between Kantian and phenomenological thought has been stressed by Livingstone and Harrison. In both it is assumed that knowledge does not exist independently of the human being, but has to be gained from human experience. Thus the world can be understood only in reference to the human being<sup>17</sup>.

##### 5. Buttimer's values

In the 1970s, Anne Buttimer attempted to answer the demand for a restoration of the human being as "the unique and potentially creative centre of the systems we model"<sup>18</sup>. In contrast to the many claims for anthropocentrism in geography, she pointed out that geographers had construed the human being in a highly reductionist fashion, and she noted how questions of the nature of being had generally remained within the exclusive domain of the philosopher and had been given little attention by geographers.

Buttimer noted that despite their declared interest in the totality of forms, geographers had usually focused more on the external forms than on the essences of phenomena. Their limited interest in values was confined to those expressed in the landscape, while the wider metaphysical issues were not considered an appropriate area of concern. She criticised this approach which neglected to examine the nature

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<sup>16</sup> J. A. May, *Kant's Concept of Geography and its Relation to Recent Geographical Thought*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1970.

<sup>17</sup> E. Relph, *An Inquiry into the Relations Between Phenomenology and Geography*, «The Canadian Geographer», 14 (1970), pp. 193-201.

<sup>18</sup> A. Buttimer, o. c., p. 36.



of the behaving form as a prerequisite for explaining observed behaviour. A variety of approaches were adopted in geography emphasising a rational notion of the human being. Some adopted a functionalist view accepting that since one could only know phenomena, then there is only the phenomenal world. In France, on the other hand, some debate took place about the assertion that the spiritual nature of man was significant in geography. Those who advocated man's spiritual nature emphasised the explanatory power of factors such as memory, symbol, hope and ideals as a challenge to explanations based on a naturalistic or technological necessity.

Although human geography during the 1970s was characterised by considerable optimism as it adopted the more sophisticated quantitative methodology of "spatial science", Buttimer was not at all convinced that the new rationality was in a position to deepen our understanding of the problems of humanity, some of which had resulted from the effects of Enlightenment science. The challenge, in her view, was to transcend the determinisms which had clouded our thinking and to look to scholars like Scheler, Reinach and Hartmann, who claimed that there is an objective, transcendent order of values which are "eternal and immutable"<sup>19</sup>.

Almost twenty years later in *Geography and the Human Spirit*, Buttimer reiterated that "ontological issues are again discussible" and the problem once again was how to interpret the Protagorean motto "The proper study of mankind is man"<sup>20</sup>. While Buttimer was the first geographer to examine the effects on human geography of neglecting ontological questions, her own suggested solution has been to favour a humanistic geography centred on phenomenology to enable geography to "perform as leaven in the mass of contemporary science and humanities"<sup>21</sup>.

## 6. The postmodern critique

Some query "the" Enlightenment, because it may have meant different things in different places. Its naturalistic thrust in France, for example, was quite different from the way it was used by Common Sense philosophers like Reid in Scotland and by moral philosophers in America. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment was

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<sup>19</sup> A. Buttimer, o. c., p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> A. Buttimer, *Geography and the Human Spirit*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1993, pp. 203-204,

<sup>21</sup> A. Buttimer, 1993, o. c., p. 24.

characterised by a preoccupation with order, truth, reason and logic. A law-seeking form of science emerged which tried to apply scientific thinking to the humanities. Postmodernism is the most recent critique of the Enlightenment within the social sciences. Postmodernism has attempted to undermine the widely-shared philosophical assumption that there is a degree of order in the world and that there is a rationality to creation which structures and governs its works. It is particularly critical of what it calls the "metanarratives", which seek to explain human existence, and which it regards as being insensitive to differences between people and places.

Lyotard, for example, has insisted that modernist metanarratives are seriously compromised by the profound differences that fracture human populations into so many groups and subgroups. It has also been suggested that Foucault's criticism of "total history" was prompted by sensitivity to the geography of the world. This, however, stems less from a direct engagement with geography than from what has been called "the revenge of the particular". What has now moved to centre stage are all the "particulars" that were supposed not to feature in the academy: gender, race and so on. Now these are dominating the discourse and seeking to subvert every generalisation<sup>22</sup>.

This aspect of postmodernism, nevertheless, is reminiscent of pre-positivist human geography which was characterised by a sensibility for the personality and character of particular places and peoples. It could be argued that pre-positivist human geography was inherently metaphysical in its perspective insofar as it allowed those being studied to speak for themselves and did not exclude transcendent dimensions of human existence. While the positive contribution of the postmodern critique of Enlightenment thinking, and in particular of the application of a positivist epistemology to geography, is to be welcomed, it is clear that postmodernism is quite antagonistic towards metaphysics. Jacques Derrida rejected metaphysics as "the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West"<sup>23</sup>. Commenting on the hostility of postmodernists and deconstructionists to metaphysics, Lowe notes that these writers represent metaphysics as a "temporary aberration of the Western intellect" denying the notion that it is a pursuit of perennial questions for which timeless answers may be legitimately sought<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984; P. Cloke, C. Philo and D. Sadler, o. c., pp. 194-195.

<sup>23</sup> J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago University Press 1982, p. 213.

<sup>24</sup> E. J. L. Lowe, o. c., p. 559.

Questions of representation are at the root of all postmodernisms, all of which portray incredulity towards notions of truth. As for Nietzsche, all values, including truth, goodness and subjectivity possess inherently unstable appearances for postmodernists, and because of their opposition to these philosophical notions, some postmodernists hold strong anti-humanist views<sup>25</sup>. Much of the postmodern discourse also reflects a radical relativism, despite the rejection of this criticism by Gregory in his *Geographical Imaginations*. Harvey noted that postmodernists continued to deploy truth terms of their own, suggesting a continued belief in an ultimate truth which they theoretically claim cannot exist<sup>26</sup>.

Bernstein criticises the many postmodern thinkers "who slip back into a crude form of binary thinking when they damn universality, identity, totality, and praise particularity, difference and fragmentation"<sup>27</sup>. In his view the totalising critique that seeks to expose all norms and standards is self-defeating. Bauman refers to the crisis among intellectuals who no longer feel themselves able to provide "an authoritative solution to the questions of cognitive truth, moral judgement and aesthetic taste"<sup>28</sup>.

While raising some critical points about postmodernism, Gregory's *Geographical Imaginations* is generally a positive evaluation of this recent influence within geography. He sees postmodernism as an effective critique of Descartes' foundationalism, which sought to legitimise its own claims to knowledge by devaluing whatever lay beyond its sovereign grasp. Gregory concludes that postmodernism's celebration of difference is peculiarly suited to the late twentieth century, to help us to come to terms with the "bewilderment of the contemporary"<sup>29</sup>. One might wonder about the extent to which postmodernist thinking has been responsible for this state of bewilderment. For Livingstone, those who abandon the notion of rationality altogether are as open to the charge of incoherence as were the classical foundationalists<sup>30</sup>. Lowe suggests that the enemies of metaphysics could be accused of promoting a particular metaphysical dogma, and insists that since the normative categories of reason and truth transcend naturalistic reduction, they "cannot, without pragmatic incoherence, be argued out of existence"<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> L. D. Berg, *Between Modernism and Postmodernism*, «Progress in Human Geography», 17 (1993), pp. 490-507.

<sup>26</sup> D. Harvey, *Postmodern Morality Plays*, «Antipode», 24 (1992), pp. 73-81.

<sup>27</sup> R. J. Bernstein, *The Resurgence of Pragmatism*, «Social Research», 59 (1992), p. 837.

<sup>28</sup> Z. Bauman, *Is There a Postmodern Sociology?*, «Theory, Culture and Society», 5 (1988), p. 219, quoted in L. D. Berg, o. c., p. 494.

<sup>29</sup> D. Gregory, o. c., p. 139.

<sup>30</sup> D. Livingstone, o. c., p. 345.

<sup>31</sup> E. J. L. Lowe, o. c., p. 559.

## 7. Giddens and ontology

The separation of ontology and epistemology and the consequent neglect of ontological issues has resulted in a postmodernist "cul-de-sac"<sup>32</sup>. In helping historians to seek an alternative to Cartesian dualism, Collins and Hoopes turn to Anthony Giddens, who engaged the writings of the postmodernists in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Giddens pointed out that "what I'm trying to do is to work on essentially what I describe as an ontology of human society"<sup>33</sup>. He was very critical of the over-deterministic fascination that structural sociologies —notably Marxist ones— had with social structures and social systems. He tried to incorporate into his social theory the notion of human action as something rationalised and ordered by people in the world (human agents). He wanted to treat people as "knowledgeable and capable subjects, not as cultural dupes of structural determinism", and he wanted to construe the changing circumstances of social life as "skilled accomplishments" by these subjects<sup>34</sup>. Such a concern characterised a series of humanistic critiques of positivist geography in the 1970s, which were strongly opposed to the disappearance of the human agent as a "thinking, feeling, subject". Entrikin, for example, talks about an "overly objective, narrow, mechanistic and deterministic view of the human agent"<sup>35</sup>.

Giddens rejected postmodernism's "logical chasm" which separates the individual from the social "by its fallacious assumption that if there is no pre-existing or transcendental subject there can be no subject at all"<sup>36</sup>. The postmodernist tendency is to erase human agency from society and he pointed out that "the pressing task facing social theory today is not to further the conceptual elimination of the subject, but on the contrary to promote a recovery of the subject without lapsing into subjectivism"<sup>37</sup>. Giddens' structuration theory, which has had considerable influence on human geography in recent years, amounts to an assertion that human actions are structural and social structures are actions. Thus human agents are

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<sup>32</sup> S. L. Collins and J. Hoopes, *Anthony Giddens and Charles Sanders Peirce: History, Theory, and a Way Out of the Linguistic Cul-de-sac*, «Journal of the History of Ideas», 56 (1995), pp. 625-650.

<sup>33</sup> A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, Macmillan, London 1979; quoted in D. Gregory, o. c., p. 124.

<sup>34</sup> P. Cloke, C. Philo and D. Sadler, o. c., p. 97.

<sup>35</sup> J. N. Entrikin, *Contemporary Humanism in Geography*, «Annals of the Association of American Geographers», 66 (1976), p. 616.

<sup>36</sup> A. Giddens, o. c., 1979, p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> A. Giddens, o. c., 1979, pp. 69-70,

practically involved in producing and reproducing those structures that make human action possible. Collins and Hoopes reject any theory which separates epistemology from ontology resulting in conceptualising thought and reality as separate<sup>38</sup>. In their view, action and thought are practically one and making a distinction between them has resulted in lapsing into a dualistic ontology. They go on to argue that social actors use knowledge to engage in social practices which are not random but ordered and stable.

#### 8. Towards an inclusive metaphysical perspective

The traditional role of metaphysics was to provide a synthesis for the different specialisms within knowledge, and although it is generally regarded as outdated among many scholars, including philosophers, it can strengthen human geography's traditional holism by creating a greater openness to all dimensions of human existence. Geographers have become more concerned about how human beings come to know and act in the world and there is less of a tendency to ignore or assume away the complexity of human beings. A greater openness to this complexity, will provide a more solid basis for the consideration of the many ethical and moral dilemmas facing humanity as we enter the third millennium.

From a postmodernist point of view, the suggestion of the need for an inclusive metaphysical perspective might be accused of being ethnocentric on the basis that each culture has its own "metaphysics", and all of them should be treated equally. It is argued, however, that just as separate cultures do not have a unique chemistry or biology, neither do they have a distinct metaphysics. Metaphysics is a research tradition within the mainstream of philosophy, which has been pursued with a scientific approach since the time of the early Greeks, and which pervades all cultures and religious backgrounds. Rather than being a matter of choice, it is a question of going deeper and of trying to get a clearer view. This does not mean that metaphysics has no assumptions. It has, but it tries to understand its own assumptions. Metaphysics is the scientific research tradition which seeks to understand our general assumptions. The best prospect we have of ridding ourselves of our assumptions is by gaining a clear view of what those assumptions are.

The contribution of humanist geographers to date in deepening the awareness in the discipline to "what it means to be human" must be acknowledged. For Yi-Fu-

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<sup>38</sup> S. L. Collins and J. Hoopes, o. c., p. 628.

Tuan humanistic geography is about the description of "how geographical activities and phenomena reveal the quality of human awareness"<sup>39</sup>. The main purpose of exercises carried out by humanistic geographers has been to tease out the "transcendental" essences in how people experience space, place and environment<sup>40</sup>.

One of the specific policy areas to which a more metaphysical human geography can make a significant contribution is that of development. There is a long tradition within human geography, particularly among geographers of a marxist persuasion, of a deep concern with the unequal distribution of the means of subsistence, one of the greatest injustices in contemporary society. Considerable analysis has been carried out of the mechanisms within capitalism which have accentuated the widening gap between North and South and between social groups within wealthy countries such as the United States. The growing levels of unemployment throughout the world point to one of the major failures of economic development policy in recent decades.

There is a growing awareness that the type of development model which has been promoted in recent decades with its narrow focus on economic factors is no longer sustainable. One of the effects of such economistic development policy has been the efforts to impose population control programmes on Third World countries with little consideration for the values of the peoples concerned.

A metaphysical perspective within human geography would emphasise the moral character of development and the need for solidarity resulting from a greater awareness of the radical interdependence of humanity. A metaphysical human geography can help policy makers become more aware of the deficiencies of narrowly based economic policies, and of the need to replace mechanistic models with strategies which will emphasise a more sustainable approach towards development. For example, people or nations cannot be conceptualised as opportunities for exploitation within a consumerist context, while natural resources should not be exploited as if they were inexhaustible.

## 9. Conclusion

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<sup>39</sup> Y. F. Tuan, *Humanistic Geography*, «Annals of the Association of American Geographers», 66 (1976), p. 267.

<sup>40</sup> P. Cloke, C. Philo and D. Sadler, o. c., p. 81

In answering the question why human geographers should be reconsidering the exclusion of metaphysics from their discipline, this paper has focused on the effects of that exclusion. It is argued that as a consequence of the rejection of transcendent metaphysics, various non-transcendent forms such as positivism, Marxist materialism and postmodernism have had a significant impact on the development of the discipline, with some of these forms denying the very existence of metaphysics. Ontological reductionism has brought with it the danger of suppressing existential awareness and an awareness of the moral nature of humanity. In the absence of a metaphysical perspective, human geography has developed without an awareness of its own presuppositions, and without an awareness of the view of humanity which underlies its social theory.

While the contribution of the humanist perspective has made a significant contribution towards dealing with some of the effects of excluding metaphysics, its impact has been to some extent superseded by postmodernism. Postmodernism itself has made a positive contribution insofar as it has produced a trenchant critique of positivism, and it possesses a strong resemblance to pre-positivist human geography with its greater sensibility to the personality and character of places, and to the need to allow those being studied to tell their own story. But since postmodernism is a logical outcome of the replacement of ontology by epistemology, it is antagonistic towards metaphysics. It is argued, on the other hand, that a greater openness to metaphysics within human geography will help to recapture a deeper sensitivity to difference, which postmodernist scholars are seeking.

One of the most interesting lessons to be learned from examining the exclusion of metaphysics in human geography is that the more scholars have attempted to exclude such a perspective, the more reductionist and deterministic human geography has become. Human geography's capacity to provide an effective critique in such areas as development policy has been seriously handicapped by excluding metaphysics. A greater openness to all dimensions of human existence would strengthen human geography's holism and would provide a solid foundation for the consideration of the many ethical and moral dilemmas facing humanity.

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**Abstract** *From the time of Descartes a strong tendency emerged to exclude the consideration of metaphysical questions as a necessary step towards developing truly scientific disciplines. Within human geography, positivism had a significant influence in moulding the discipline as "spatial science", resulting in a reductionist vision of humanity. Since the 1970s, in*

*reaction to the limitations of this narrow vision and also to the deterministic perspective of marxism, humanistic approaches became important, but have failed to adequately deal with the exclusion of metaphysical issues. The more recent emergence of postmodern influences within human geography, while being critical of the rigidities associated with Enlightenment thinking, and suggesting a greater tolerance of "difference", appears reluctant to reconsider the exclusion of metaphysics. This paper suggest that such a reconsideration could contribute significantly towards increasing human geography's capacity to help policy makers deal more adequately with some of the major issues facing humanity.*