

The Splendour and Misery of the Anthropological Crisis: a Myth of Contemporary Russian Philosophy¹

Anton O. Zakharov

Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences
Moscow State University of Psychology and Education

Abstract. The concept of the anthropological crisis is very popular in contemporary Russian humanities: the Russian Scientific Electronic Library (Elibrary.ru) includes more than 10,000 publications with the keyword “anthropological crisis”. On the contrary, Google gives links to Russian publications only when searching “anthropological crisis”. This keyword has no reference in the famous online book catalogue Worldcat.org. Nowadays, English-speaking scientific communities still explore the crisis in anthropology as a discipline. The difference between the anthropological crisis and the crisis in anthropology seems essential. The crisis of a scientific discipline is not a crisis of human nature. Modern Russian scholars, including the late Vyacheslav Stepin, find many features of the anthropological crisis in the successes of genetic engineering and modern medicine, as well as in the growing psychological pressures that people face. Russian-language scholars find traits of the anthropological crisis in many fields, including studies of memory, bioethics, pedagogics, literature, and economics. Others, such as Vyacheslav Stepin and Boris Pruzhinin, point to the loss of a sense of meaning in life as a sign of the anthropological crisis. The problems of self-identity are also marked by Russian authors as a mark of that crisis. Sergey Averintsev felt that human beings lack human nature. Pruzhinin supposes humans cannot predict the consequences of genetic engineering for their nature as a species. But all these trends have nothing in common with the anthropological crisis. Genetic engineering helps to improve human health and self-realization. Certainly, we cannot envision all the possible consequences, but this is true of any scientific discovery or breakthrough. Cyborgs are an inevitable step towards healthier and smarter humans. Existential problems are universal since all humans are endowed with self-consciousness. Self-identities have been in constant flux since the birth of complex societies, especially since the industrial revolution strengthened alienation. The growth and volume of information flows are not threats to humans, as there is no need to memorize all the data in the world, and there are multiple network and personal filters which block garbage. The anthropological crisis seems a myth in contemporary Russian-language humanities in general and philosophy in particular.

¹ English translation from the Russian text: Zakharov A. O. 2022. The Splendour and Misery of the Anthropological Crisis: A Myth of Contemporary Russian Philosophy. *Concept: Philosophy, Religion, Culture*. 6(4). P. 7–14. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24833/2541-8831-2022-4-24-7-14>

Keywords: mythology, science, anthropological crisis, contemporaneity, Russian philosophy, industrial society, technocratic civilization

In the third issue of the *Problems of Philosophy* journal in 2022, leading Russian and Belarusian researchers once again turned to the issue of the anthropological crisis (Kolyadko 2022; Prizhunin 2022; Sabancheev 2022; Teryokhin 2022), ever popular among the Russian-speaking scientific community: the Russian Science Citation Index lists a total of 10,435 publications relating to the search words “anthropological crisis” as of July 4, 2022. The words “anthropological crisis” appear in the titles of dissertations too². However, typing “anthropological crisis” into a Google search only provides links to articles written in Russian. The largest library category in the world (Worldcat.org) has never heard of this crisis either. We can thus assume that the anthropological crisis is primarily (and perhaps exclusively) a Russian phenomenon, a scientific myth of sorts, a convenient label for reasoning on any topic – from memory (Sabancheev 2022) and bioethics (Kamalieva 2018) to pedagogy (Rybakov, Stepanov 2021), literature (Krokina 2020) and economics (Lomako 2019).

Features of the anthropological crisis, according to Vyacheslav Styopin, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, include the “danger of changing the human gene pool”, “the increasing pressure of stress loads on the individual”, and “modern trends towards redesigning the biological basis of human beings” (Styopin 2011: 95–96). But can all these phenomena really be considered signs of a crisis? And what is this crisis anyway? A fracture? A revolution in human nature? And do we really need to worry so much over an extremely biologically flawed creature who is susceptible to disease and panic, as the COVID-19 pandemic proved (Sokolova 2021)? The change in the gene pool has been taking place for thousands of years and is a natural process, although modern genetic engineering will be able to radically change the very nature of human beings in the near future. Modern medicine has radically changed the demographic structure of society, almost eliminating infant mortality completely and eradicating many diseases that led to epidemics in the past. Styopin’s fears about the “post-human” are understandable, but if we look at how people behave today, it would seem that the transition to a machine type of existence – the transition to the “Matrix” so aptly expressed in the film of the same name – is already taking place: just look at how attached people are to their smartphones, virtual networks, and the plethora of voice assistants like “OK, Google” and Siri. Even now, people spend most of their time on “machines” (I am typing these very lines, rather than writing them on paper). The technogenic

² Shlyapnikova M. N. Environmental Consciousness in the Context of the Anthropological Crisis. Ph.D. diss. (09.00.11). Volgograd, 1997; Silnova E.I. The Philosophy of Education: Looking for a Way Out of the Anthropological Crisis. Ph.D. diss. (09.00.11). Saratov, 2002; Prokhovnik O.A. The Cultural and Anthropological Crisis and New Educational Tasks in the Post-modern Era. Ph.D. diss. (09.00.13). Rostov-on-Don, 2006.

civilization that has led to the supposed anthropological crisis has in fact provided us with unprecedented access to information, the fantastic possibilities of machine learning, and a never-before-seen level of comfort and security in general.

The fears of the editor-in-chief of *Problems of Philosophy* Boris Pruzhinin (Pruzhinin 2022: 1986) about the threat to the “human in man”, first voiced by Sergei Averintsev, and the inability of society and the individual to foresee the possible consequences of changing the nature of human beings through genetic engineering are not as justified as they may appear at first glance. First of all, human beings are now merged with machines through intermediary tools – smartphones, computers, headphones, 3D glasses, and so on. The next stage is *cyborgification* – that is, placing some of these tools inside the human body, for example, in the form of microchips. The biological author of these lines has long been living with contact lenses and an artificial tendon in his arm, and I have no doubt that if we had the ability to “download” languages to our brains, this would be a very welcome development, if only because it would save us from having to memorize lists of words and phrases, not to mention foreign writing systems. *Cyborgification* could very well be followed by the complete transformation on man into machine. This is not a crisis, however. It is going beyond the limits of the human body, which needs to sleep, rest and eat – and there are not enough resources to feed everyone. It is clear that many people are conservative, and this kind of reasoning scares them. However, there is simply no alternative to *cyborgification*, and anyone who is prepared to improve their body by radically transforming their biological nature will receive enormous benefits in return: improved vision, increased endurance, a better memory, enhanced knowledge... Just look at wheelchair users, for example, who can easily overtake ordinary runners, as it is an objective fact that the wheel is faster than the legs. Those who call for preserving the traditional biological species and the human gene pool will simply lose out to the people-machines.

All the achievements of genetic engineering, as well as the development of a technogenic civilization in general, are the result of scientific research. In this sense, science has been the main productive force of society since at least the dawn of the scientific and technological revolution. Therefore, discussions about the crisis of scientific rationality, the refusal to recognize scientific knowledge as the dominant and fundamental means of a rational understanding of the world, turn out to be nothing more than an attempt to confuse the reader. The fact is that there is no serious alternative to scientific knowledge, because scientific knowledge is what provides the eight billion people living on this planet with food, the ability to communicate instantaneous with anyone anywhere, medicines, and knowledge about the processes that take place on Earth and beyond. The call to abandon science in favour of a different picture of the world, typically a religious understanding of it, essentially represents a return to caves.

The psychological problems of self-identification in a constantly changing world are not a harbinger of a special kind of crisis: existential problems have occupied people's thoughts throughout history. Just look at Gilgamesh's search for immortality, Shakespeare's immortal lines “to be or not to be”, Dostoevsky's “whether I am a trem-

bling creature or whether I have the right...” and the philosophy of Sartre and Camus. The breakneck speed at which changes take place in society is typically interpreted as a problem adapting to it. But this is not really the case: in the context of the almost complete disappearance of the biological factors of natural selection, people have started to become hypersensitive to the most significant changes in their situation. Hence all the talk about hurt feelings and the growing intolerance of opinions that do not align with one’s own, as they take them out of their “safe space” – the main value in modern society.

The increasing amount and speed of information flows, as an objective factor, does not mean an anthropological crisis (Boronoeva 2013; Zhelin 2015; Eriksen 2003). We know how to manage information flows effectively today. For example, we can change the settings on our favourite websites, particularly YouTube and Facebook (which is banned in Russia)³, so that we only get information that is necessary or interesting to us in our feeds. And Russian and international citation databases such as the Web of Science, Scopus and the Russian Science Citation Index allow us to search for the information we need using keywords. It is highly unlikely that the speed of information flow could pose a threat to human nature, especially if we see human nature as a creative transformational activity (and the playful nature of humans, as Johan Huizinga noted, only benefits from having a wide variety of games to play). Objections such as the inability to cope with the sheer volume of information are untenable at best due to the fact that no single person has ever been in possession of all the information available in a given era since the beginning of the social division of labour. And this is even truer in today’s industrial society. We use (super) computers to process large amounts of data. So, the information-based anthropological crisis is nothing more than a myth.

The attempt to connect the anthropological crisis with the “production of risks” in Ulrich Beck’s “risk society” and reduce it (the crisis) to the “disintegration of being” looks like mythmaking too, only on the part of science (Lomako 2019: 72; Beck 2015; 2016). First of all, being, by definition, cannot be broken: being is what it is. Second, economic risks have always existed – suffice it to recall the threat of famine in primitive and agrarian societies, or the crises of overproduction in the nineteenth century capitalist societies. There is no point singling out the production of risks as a special stage of social development after the industrial and post-industrial (which is, in fact industrial too, as all three sectors of production, including agriculture and the services sector, become industrial) stages, since it happens in violation of the rule of a single criterion for any classification.

The idea that the anthropological crisis is “reflected in the feeling that life has lost its meaning, a sense of harmony with nature, vague notions about one’s place in society, the world and the universe as a whole” (Zvonok 2021: 6; King 2021; Sugrobova, Karpova, Dorofei 2020) is equally spurious. Ecclesiastes spoke about how life had lost

³ Facebook is banned in the Russian Federation.

its meaning, as did the ancient Greek and Chinese philosophers. Evidently, just about everyone at one time or another has wrestled with thoughts about their place in society, the world and the universe as a whole: Does the fact that we know the universe is infinite prevent an individual from seeing himself as its centre, especially if immense power is concentrated in his hands? Did peasants see themselves as part of the “peasant” class? Does the objective position of the proletariat, now hidden under the name “precariat”, change when individual representatives see themselves as part of the middle class? If the uncertainty about one’s place in the world and ideas about life losing all meaning are signs of an anthropological crisis, then we must be living in this crisis all the time, which would mean that we cannot learn anything about the specific features of this phenomenon. More than that, it turns out to be banal ignorance and stupidity the moment we cannot find something meaningful to fill our time.

Arguments about the crisis of culture in general⁴, and the unfolding of the anthropological crisis as a lag in the spiritual and moral development of humankind behind scientific and technological progress⁵ noted by science fiction writers such as Stanisław Lem in *His Master’s Voice*, are built on excessively vague and ambiguous grounds. First of all, it is impossible to determine what precisely constitutes spiritual and moral development. A good moral character is fine as a concept, but what does it actually mean in practice? Not committing crimes out of fear and/or conviction? Saving the life of every single person is afforded the highest value today. However, the only thing that comes close to achieving this is modern medicine, which is responsible for eliminating the terrifyingly high child and female mortality rates of previous centuries. But it is the done thing these days to criticize modern civilization for its lack of spirituality. But the fact is that it is the most humane and spiritual that has ever existed. There are many grounds for us to make this conclusion. For example, information is now available to far more people than it was in the days when it was simply inaccessible for large strata of society. Freedom of conscience allows a variety of worldviews to coexist, which is in sharp contrast to the inequality of non-state religions in traditional societies, and even modern states that have an official religion.

Thus, the anthropological crisis would seem to be a fictitious, far-fetched concept that does not reflect the key features of modernity, and instead confuses its understanding. Science, like any other sphere of life, is not free from mythmaking, and the anthropological crisis is one of the myths of the Russian-language humanitarian discourse.

⁴ For an overview of these concepts, see: Aleksina T. A. 2011. *The Anthropological Crisis and Environmental Ethics: Study Guide*. Moscow: Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia.; as well as a number of other works (Sugrobova, Karpova, Dorofei 2020).

⁵ Inozemtsev V. L. 2000. *The Modern Post-Industrial Society: Nature, Contradictions, Prospects. Study Guide for Economics Students*. Moscow: Logos.

About the Author:

Anton O. Zakharov – Doctor of History, Lead Research Fellow (Southeast Asia, Australia and Pacific), Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 12 Rozhdestvenka str., Moscow, Russia, 107031; Professor at the Department of Philosophy and the Humanities, Moscow State University of Psychology and Education, 29 Sretenka str., Moscow, Russia, 127051. E-mail: Zakharov_anton@mail.ru

Conflicts of interest.

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

This article was submitted on October 25, 2022, approved after review on November 21, 2022, and accepted for publication on November 28, 2022.

References:

Beck U. 2015. Weltrisikogesellschaft: auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Sicherheit. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp (Edition zweite Moderne).

Beck U. 2016. Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Boroneva N. A. 2013. Antropologicheskiiy krizis v kontekste globalizatsii [Anthropological crisis in the context of globalization]. *Aktualnye problemy gumanitarnykh i estestvennykh nauk*. 5. P. 202–207. (In Russian).

Eriksen T. H. 2001. *Øyeblikkets tyranni*. Oslo: Aschehou. In *Tiraniya momenta: Vremya v epokhu informatsii*. 2003. (Russ. ed.). Moscow: Ves' mir Publ.

Kamalieva I. R. 2018. The Anthropological Crisis in Modern Medicine. *Philosophy and Culture*. 5(5). P. 65–70. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7256/2454-0757.2018.5.26164>

Kolyadko I. N. 2022. The Anthropological Crisis of the Technogenic Civilization: Parameters and Perspectives on How to Overcome it. *Voprosy Filosofii*. 3. P. 76–80. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21146/0042-8744-2022-3-76-80>

Korol A. D. 2021. The Anthropological Crisis in the Social Realities of the 21st Century. *Russian Journal of Philosophical Sciences*. 64(5). P. 45–56. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30727/0235-1188-2021-64-5-45-56>

Krokhina N. P. 2020. The Anthropological Crisis in the Reception of Russian Literature of the Late Twentieth Century. *Noosfernye issledovaniâ*. 2. P. 78–83. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46724/NOOS.2020.2.78-83>

Lomako O. M. 2019. The Anthropological Crisis in the Risk Society: A Philosophical Analysis. *RUDN Journal of Philosophy*. 23(1). P. 66–73. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2302-2019-23-1-66-73>

Pruzhinin B. I. 2022. The Anthropological Crisis as a Theme of Philosophy. *Voprosy Filosofii*. 3. P. 86–92. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21146/0042-8744-2022-3-86-92>.

Rybakov S., Stepanov I. I. 2021. Postmodernism in Pedagogy as a Reflection of the Fundamental Anthropological Crisis. *Duhovno-nravstvennoe vospitanie*. 4. P. 3–8. (In Russian).

Sabancheev R. Y. 2022. The Phenomenon of Memory in the Era of the Crisis of Technogenic Civilization. *Voprosy Filosofii*. 3. P. 71–75. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21146/0042-8744-2022-3-71-75>

Sokolova S. N. 2021. The Anthropological Crisis: Human Security and Society During the Pandemic. *Vestnik Polesskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya obshchestvennykh i humanitarnykh nauk*. 1. P. 74–80. (In Russian).

Stepin V. S. 2011. *Tsivilizatsiya i kul'tura [Civilization and Culture]*. Saint Petersburg: SPbGUP Publ. (In Russian).

Sugrobova Y. Y., Karpova I. D., Dorofei Y. O. 2020. The Parameters of the Anthropological Crisis and the Modern Global Generation. *Man and Culture*. 6. P. 22–34. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25136/2409-8744.2020.6.34308>

Terekhin E. L. 2022. Search for New Types of Scientific Rationality in an Anthropological Crisis: a Relativistic Approach. *Voprosy Filosofii*. 3. P. 81–86. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21146/0042-8744-2022-3-81-85>

Zheltnin A. I. 2015. The Informational Dimension of the Anthropologic Crisis of Civilization (on the Informational Impact on the Person, Human Psychology and Biology). *Informacionnoe obščestvo*. 6. P. 35–41. (In Russian).

Zvonok A. A. 2021. Modern Science and Education: Anthropological Crisis. *Vestnik Luganskogo Gosudarstvennogo Pedagogicheskogo Universiteta. Ser. 1: Pedagogicheskie nauki. Ovrazovanie*. 64(2). P. 5–9. (In Russian).