

Education and defense of the human

Abstract

The defense of the human is a central theme in education, aimed, in the debate, at delineating what is not human in the first place. It is an anthropological problem that finds fertile ground in education, where dialogue, intentionality and, in a broad sense, relationship call the territory of the human to the exercise of its ontological characteristic. Man's characterizing traits are beyond the limits and possibility of naturalness, in the sphere of *intentionality*, *meaning*, *value* and *freedom*. Recognizing that modifications of human nature, for the benefit of technology, could be degrading is not just a hypothesis.

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Introduction

The second half of the 20th century, and even more so the third millennium, has seen the proliferation of a dizzying technological development that has profoundly altered the codes of interpretation of the relationship between man and external reality and has changed the phenomenology that characterizes social action, with the growth of processes considered by most not of crisis, but of pure *transformation* of the boundaries of the human with respect to the non-human, outside of anthropocentric assumptions, in the availability of improper forms of hybridization of man with his own cultural products and, in particular, with the transgression of the boundary between man and machine, between man and animal, with scientific projects inhabited by the contamination of man with human organisms, biotechnological grafts, protein manipulation, connections with computer supports in which men are destined to assume lesser or greater value in relation to the degree of conjugation with the non-human world.¹

The vast research effort into biotechnology and nanotechnology opens the prospect of a technology that invades the body, offering mankind many evolutionary possibilities, in a phase of rapid transformation in which the increasingly powerful possibilities of intervention modify the structural and functional characteristics of the body, affecting the ontological identity, increasingly within an uncontrolled optional vastness aimed at satisfying new needs for perfection and well-being.²

Discussion

In the national scientific debate on the subject, one speaks of *transformation* rather than crisis, because it is believed that the hybridization of man with the animal and artificial world is constructed as a resizing and redistribution of differences and identities, but not as a total abandonment of the anthropocentric model. Rather, the project is that of a completely artificial man, born from the overcoming of any

¹In Italy, the rethinking of the relationship between human and non-human, in relation to both the crisis of anthropocentrism and the new links with technology, is being pursued by a group of scholars from different disciplines and theoretical orientations with implications in the social, cultural, political, economic, and material spheres. For a bibliography of reference see in particular: Costa M. *The Technological Sublime. Piccolo trattato di estetica della tecnologia*. Rome: Castelvecchi; 1998; Longo GO. *Homo technologicus*. Rome: Melteni; 2001; Marchesini R. *Post-human. Towards new models of existence*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri; 2002; Perniola M. *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico*. Milan: Mondadori; 1994; Costa M. *Formatività e lavoro nella società delle macchine intelligenti. Il talento tra robot, i.a. ed ecosistemi digitali del lavoro*. Milan: Franco Angeli; 2019.

²Marchesini R. *Post-human. Towards new models of existence*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri; 2002. 190 p.

objective difference between natural and artificial, which is proposed as replicated and replicating, beyond the valorization of any identity process open to the need for recognition and respect.

In such a different humanist conception of the world, culture no longer appears as the completion of nature, but as the engine of nature. The logic of culture assumes prominence over the logic of man, so that «in the construction of biohybrid interfaces, it is no longer possible to distinguish where man ends and the computer begins, since the integration becomes so close that to speak of a cyber-prosthesis is frankly reductive».³

An explicit indicator of the crisis of the concept of dignity is therefore included in the *post-human perspective* of redefining the relationship between man and technology and the world of the living, with the underlining of causes acting on man from the outside and capable of determining ways of being and behavior, with crossings of the social, cultural, political, economic and material spheres, and with the questioning of the concept of human nature and the very meaning of dignity.

Already animalist philosophy subjects the categories of humanity and animality to critical analysis and reflects on the man/animal relationship traditionally built on the thesis that this relationship is untenable because the meaning of human nature is not animal nature⁴. Not differently can we record what happens within the most radical ecological reflection that, when it develops along the

³Ibid. 445 p.

⁴In the perspective of *reductionist anthropology*, *being* is flattened on the *bios* and the existence of spiritual realities in man is a priori denied, whereby an attempt is made to reduce man's *higher faculties* (rationality, self-awareness, freedom) to mere *psychic dynamisms*. Once the spiritual dimension of man is excluded, the demarcation between humanity and non-humanity or animality becomes evanescent. Indeed, not only is our mental life considered to be nothing more than an effect of the activity of the central nervous system, but it can also be scientifically demonstrated that it takes place on a structure that is largely common to other species: the most recent data offered by comparative neurophysiology show that there is a real similarity and continuity of fundamental neurophysiological functions in all multi-cellular animals, including man, and that the similarities increase - as can be guessed - with the increasing position of a certain species on the zoological scale. The continuity at the level of neurological structures and the homogeneities of functioning, suggest that there must also be a true continuity between the mental functions that these structures and functions subtend, and one can legitimately think of a continuity between human sentience, intelligence, self-awareness and animal sentience, intelligence, self-awareness. There is therefore no insurmountable barrier between humans and non-humans, and it becomes possible to compare psychic experiences between different species based on the established similarity of the fundamental properties of neurons, synapses, and neuroendocrine mechanisms.

lines of evolutionary theories, thinks of a physical nature capable of encompassing man's inner nature, to the point of no longer being able to say in what way the human is distinguished from his 'environment', the non-human; to the point of incorporating man into the codes of evolution. Again, there is an artificial distancing from the *proprium of human dignity*, which is not explicitly denied, but neither is it positively affirmed. Dignity is reduced to a mere *possibility*, which can only be realized under certain conditions and only if it can provide benefits.

We are faced with a process of humanizing nature, the fundamental content of which is the naturalization of humanity, in the domain of the artificial and in the belief that the preservation of nature is itself the preservation of the human. The expansion of such orientations of thought already prepares the emptying of the meaning of human life in the totality of the human dimensions of existence, towards an exclusively biological sense, between aspirations and increasingly complicated mechanisms of organic development and physiological organization, with the weakening of all forms of action that can distinguish man from the empirical of experimental naturalism. These perspectives take on, consolidate and develop the theory of evolution, proposed by Darwin in 1859, which, born as a simple biological hypothesis, becomes the key to interpreting reality, for a human species understood as an accidental by-product of a random evolutionary process, a response to unpredictable environmental changes for which no right to any privilege is envisaged, and for a human nature that, as a contingent phenomenon, does not stand as the foundation of values and morality.⁵

We are witnessing the fall of every consolidated and shared ethical rule, which has always supported the inviolability of the person and is now undermined in the laboratory or by the increasing use of drugs that alter the emotional nature; no longer respectful of the unavailability of his birth; designed and realized with a calculated decision and gesture, with the progressive concealment of what characterizes the sphere of the human in the dimensions of intentionality, meaning and freedom, with the annulment of the boundaries between nature and culture, between society and nature in favour of the dominion of the non-human. We are not yet in a position to assess the repercussions in the social, political, economic and educational spheres, but the optimization of man by man poses radical questions on the moral understanding of the human race, on the very concept of 'gender' and 'human specificity', and above all on the possibility that the logic of the survival of the fittest may be proposed as a sort of *metanarrative* of modernity, open to all forms of instrumentalization and bent towards extra-scientific ideological uses.

This is a *crisis of humanism* and the prefiguration of new traditions ordered by techno science as the projection/extension of man and as the annulment of human centrality and the exaltation of heteroreferentiality and hybridity. A new anthropological model is prefigured within a culture largely indebted to the scientific, physiological, and biological interpretation of man, which in its most familiar applications is projected into the redefinition of reproductive practices, presides over the project of cloning and the predetermination of genetic traits, and conditions the practices of prolonging or interrupting existence. And it is also a model that conditions the increasingly articulated and sophisticated relationships with the living environment and with animals, to extend to the whole of culture, to the point of redetermining the terms of human identity and specificity.

In such research, the term 'natural' is understood as what happens in nature, as an empirical-scientific dimension of which everything

⁵Singer C. BRIEF HISTORY OF SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT. Turin: Einaudi; 1961.

can be known and modified, with an obvious degradation of man, affected in the consciousness of his identity, in the exercise of his freedom, in the value of his having to be, in the dynamic evaluation of his existential planning.⁶ On the persistence of this misunderstanding - a sign of materialism and in humanism - the thesis of a substantial ontological imperfection of man, of a natural incompleteness prior to culture, is being built, such as to justify any choice oriented towards redesigning the body, embarking on adventures in unknown dimensions and questioning the perceptive and interpretative registers that characterize the current phase of personal and social culture.⁷ Culture and technology are asked for a repertoire of possible prostheses, crutches, and surrogates, capable of filling forms of organic incompleteness and imperfection. The same culture and technique implicitly operate with the aim of generating new needs, continually shifting the threshold of hybridization processes between *bios* and *techene*. Thus, we see processes of advancement of culture, which in its biotechnological aspects acts directly in the constitution of human nature and gives rise to deficiencies that it itself corrects, shifting the imbalance forward from nature.⁸

These are some of the indefinite projections that soon will make the scientific-technological paradigm hegemonic and already invoke greater social and cultural legitimacy, just as they induce the idea of a different humanism, capable of justifying a human nature that can be improved with the application of science and all other rational methods capable of increasing human lifespan, increasing physical and intellectual capacities.⁹ But the acceleration of techno-scientific development brings man into the disarming experience of remaining separated from reality, as he perceives himself as a being endowed with a special interiority and with an ever-stronger need to immerse himself in interaction with technological otherness, to feel at the same time more powerful, because he is able to expand his domain of operation,¹⁰ and weaker, because he is frighteningly dependent on external instruments for his performative expressions. Precisely with reference to this difficult contextual location, the appeal to human dignity becomes more urgent and yet it is believed that it can be fulfilled outside a code of meaning governed by ethical values and criteria, as if dignity can be understood according to a kind of self-referentiality. This, moreover, is one of the reasons that increases the need for new forms of protection and promotion of human dignity and makes one experience the difficulty of converging towards positive actions elaborated in the light of a strong idea of man, of the integrity of his nature, of a shared good.¹¹

The defense of dignity referred to in this reflection rests on a kind of 'ontological boundary' that distinguishes man -without separating him - from the non-human, but does not fit the logic of the new frontiers that cross the boundary of human integrity and make the

⁶It is no different in the field of artificial intelligence which, in its most ambitious research, believes that it can tap the higher faculties of the human mind, which have always been considered 'exclusive' to man, to design a nature of man on the same level as a sophisticated artefact. Cf. Longo GO. *Homo technologicus*. Roma: Melteni; 2001.

⁷Ibid. 233 p.

⁸Ibid. 30 p.

⁹Reference is made to the technologies of genetic engineering, information technology, molecular nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence. Added to this is the risk on the horizon of the most advanced organic computer systems with a more efficient memory capacity that could exceed that critical threshold allowing the emergence of consciousness.

¹⁰Costa M. Training and work in the society of intelligent machines. Talent among robots, i.a. and digital ecosystems of the lavoro. Milan: Franco Angeli; 2019.

¹¹Roth K, Mollvik L, Alshoufani R, et al. Philosophy of education in a new key: Constraints and possibilities in present times about dignity. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. 2022;54(8):1147-1161.

idea of man weak and faded, with an identity perceived, constructed and recognized not so much on the basis of ethical-moral instances, but in relation to the advancement of the most radical processes of interaction, interchange, incorporation, assimilation, hybridization of human and non-human. Thus, for man, for whom the recognition of a stable identity in the sense of humanism is increasingly challenged, the possibility of a perfect dominion over the outside world is pursued, in a future of physical and psychic enhancements, of overcoming irreversible biological phenomena, without any reference to axiological reasons that found the human value.¹²

The close relationship between biology and genetic manipulation and cloning, affects the elaboration of the sense of dignity, which also changes in the same temporal space, chases projects and circumstances, changes value in relation to the advancement of hybridization processes between *bios* and *techene*, and increasingly depends on a culture that shifts the reduction of imbalance in relation to nature forward, and at the same time in a fragmented ontological universe from which «mosaics of unpredictable possibilities» can come to life.¹³ It is believed we can do without man as paradigm, underestimating his enormous power of intervention and his decision-making reality, which is in any case extraordinarily superior to that of the non-human and the artificial, but this also entails the impossibility of defining a paradigmatic man capable of renouncing what characterizes him in qualitative discontinuity with the non-human world and at the same time claiming to be capable of declining the new and bringing order to the magmatic world of the scientific development of biotechnology.

Conclusion

The highest emergency is to wait for the recovery of the specificity of the human, so that we can continue to «prove the existence of

¹²Qerimi Q. Dignity in transition: the constitutional and operational potential and limits of human dignity seen from the lens of post-conflict societies. *The International Journal of Human Rights*. 2021;25(8):1211–1232.

¹³Alfano Maglietti F. Identità mutanti. From the crease to the plague: beings of contemporary contaminations. Genoa: Costa & Nolan; 1997;161 p.

man».¹⁴ As Fukuyama, the theorist of the end of history, warns, the indiscriminate use of technology to liberate the human condition from biological limits is one of the most dangerous ideas in the world, and the prospect that humans may be denied a higher moral status than the rest of the natural world is in fact a rejection of human nature as an ethical parameter, threatens human dignity, and opens a slide towards a post-human condition.¹⁵

This is, of course, not a rejection of the most advanced research that best explores 'naturalness', knows its limits and investigates every further possibility of cure and enhancement, but a warning to continue to think that the traits characterizing human beings are beyond the limits and possibility of naturalness,¹⁶ in the sphere of *intentionality, meaning, value, freedom*, and to recognize that particular modifications of human nature might be degrading.¹⁷

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Conflicts of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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¹⁴Cf. Agazzi E. Prove the existence of man. In: Donati P, editors. *The culture of life. From traditional to postmodern society*. Milan: Franco Angeli; 1989;37 p.

¹⁵Cf. Fukuyama F. *Man beyond man*. Milan: Mondadori; 2002.

¹⁶Crotti M. *Each person is silence. Silence as a pedagogical resource*. Rome: Studium; 2023.

¹⁷Marchesini R. *Post-human. Towards new models of existence*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri; 2002;190 p.