



Humanities and Artificial Intelligence

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Some considerations on the Posthuman

Luigi A. Manfreda

What relationship and what difference is there between anthropocentrism and the awareness – having its first beginnings with Montaigne – of being placed (historical, relative, limited by a culture) of each discourse? The latter poses on one hand as a non-sense a say on behalf of the absolute truth, but on the other hand it acknowledges that there is no escape from a certain perspective view, historically determined (what Nietzsche defined evaluate) and this implies the impossibility that another parameter, being human, too human, is available: that there is no escape from its own horizon. What seems a humble acknowledgement of one's own limits shows its insidious reversal: if our logos flows in a space marked by its own borders (that itself recognizes), yet – in the scope of our own experience – it is nothing but the human. Even when we meet an animal or a tree.

Certainly, anthropocentrism means many things. We here refer to it in the close relationship it maintains with modern subjectivism, that in turn emerges in Descartes and Bacon to be then subjected to a strong destabilisation by Copernicus and Darwin's theory. It is not a case that Hegel states that with Descartes thought touches the ground at last – its own ground. From now on every discourse will have to come to terms with the preliminary reflection on who produces it, with its genesis. Descartes' Cogito conceives to overcome the problem of the historicity of this origin by a feature that will become constant in the anthropocentrism that characterizes the modern age: the self-generation of the human as logos, the assuming itself as its own foundation. In this way man's placing himself at the centre of the world will measure itself against the double aspect of that awareness we were talking previously: relinquishment of an absolute truth and temptation to include any possible in a horizon that holds together the different discourses, despite their differences.

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We could devise this flowing from a pole to the other as a sort of justification of anthropocentrism and of its eldest offspring, speciesism. In the use of the world and of animals, in the master's assumption of their 'material' in view of one's own projects, there would not be willingness of power marked by hybris but need determined by destiny that no one has chosen. But it is exactly on the overcoming of the idea of destiny that the praxis of the 'new technique' is based, at work for example in AI. Getting closer to the nature of its 'design' will always imply the attempt to bring it back to its matrixes.

Despite the appearances, placing the new technique (cyborg, robotics, AI, biotechnologies etc.) in the riverbed of humanistic tradition can be grasped in many ways. It is advisable at this point to distinguish Humanism, if we mean by that the Italian Renaissance between 1400 and 1500, from humanism, that is, the wider movement of modern anthropocentrism that has its own roots not only in Renaissance but also in modern science and subjectivism. We need here to refer to the latter: the place where Man's state of minority, as Kant will later state, starts.

According to a movement that can be already perceived in Pico della Mirandola, it is not a matter of realizing, of completing a human nature already given, but – thanks to the uniqueness of the human being, to his ontological privilege – of always forging it anew, of re-creating it. It is unique the wide scope of possibilities given by this peculiar freedom of its. In this new space destiny is confined to the darkness of mythical powers, being now left behind.

It is a freedom that must be exercised, first of all, by clearing, creating new space, downwards and upwards. On one hand towards the opacity of the animal, the determinism of body impulses from which it is necessary to stray, to purify in view of that total rule of oneself as Zivilisation requires. On the other hand, that is, upwards, towards the fatal that is still present in the last deities. The myth of freedom has been thus translated into a progressive disengagement: from everything in what man has been formed – as Darwin on one hand and anthropology on the other hand have shown. Another, a heterogeneous, in which the shadow of the engagement is perceived – starting from our body itself, that brings us to our being mortals – from which we free ourselves each time and that yet always returns.

Completing the detachment from animality means distancing oneself up to a point of no return from the opaqueness of the bodily unconsciousness that evokes the limit of our ability of control-rule over ourselves and over the world. There is no radical difference, from this viewpoint, from the robotic protheses that are integral parts of the body, strengthening it in so far as cyborg to the plan to move the mental, our own, in the polished neutral of the machine, to ‘expatriate’ into its uncorruptable pureness. This corresponds, on a larger scale, to the astrophysicists’ ponderings on the possibility to leave Earth when its energy sources finish and it is exhausted by then, and to settle in other planets where another life is imaginable. Our biological destiny is thus re-created, or rather: it is shown how it is possible to free ourselves from destiny itself.

Now, if we think of destiny in these terms, the strengthening that cyborg and AI represent in the human ability to remould the world and experience itself, it is nothing else than the aspiration to overcome tout court the material-biological. It is a united possible route that yet places itself in the riverbed of western Humanism that, as stated previously, is based on an alleged, absolute uniqueness of the human being, on his immense, ontological distance from the animal and from the substance of the world. As a matter of fact, on one hand the fact that complex AI machines tend to human (to sensibility, to human creativities etc.) and make out a limit in still not reaching this target, should suggest us something. But on the other hand, the human nature and the world’s one, scrutinized by the mathematical eye, present themselves in forms that hint at their own overcoming. The paradox is evident: what establish itself as something precious and unique, in a uniqueness that justifies a use of the other animal species and of the world through denial, ends up in denying itself. And not only in its reduction to a usable bottom, but, in a broader perspective, as being affected, in spite of everything, by the limitation of death.

It’s quite understandable, then, the trend, visible in the last decades, to distance oneself from the humanistic tradition – and likewise understandable, at this point, how ultimately it proves to be difficult. It has taken two main forms. The first is called post-human since it means to replace the human in the wake of Darwin’s lesson and of anti-speciesism of Singer and anthropologists, in its original foundation through hybridisations (through the animal and the ‘mate-

rial' of different nature where experience is determined). It should generate a changed attitude towards nature and the other animal species, that would no longer be experienced in the separation of the other. The second lives without any nostalgia the progressive detachment that the new technique produces as regards the traditional idea of man and reckons the strengthening of human faculties as foreboding new and unprecedented possibilities to be warmly welcomed. The sunset of man would thus be a hypothesis to examine coldly, with disenchantment, in sight of a wider and more inclusive AI. Now, apart from the fact that today the ways that may bring to the establishment of the first trend seem chimeric, when everything moves towards the second one, in a sort of *Totale Mobilmachung*, what is common between the two standpoints is the typically humanistic ideal of an emancipation from destiny as something that limits and is not chosen. The first standpoint would mean to get rid of the idea of destiny at the root: there is no human nature, precisely determined from its origin, and the various changes that may produce durable, structural effects are completely contingent. The second one 'weakens', empties destiny turning it into an obstacle, a limit to overcome constantly thanks to the willingness and technical ingenuity of man: his peculiarity lies in his ability to change and recreate it.

The idea of destiny is the darkest among those thought has measured its strength against, since its beginnings. It should be considered in relation with logos, with the logical-linguistic structures where our experiences of the world have been inscribed, rather than trying to raise holding up to our hair, reflecting on how to be in this emergency, how to answer the appeal coming from this historical opening of ours. Devastation of earth and extermination of billions living beings in the slaughterhouses all over the world, for instance, are events that should be deciphered as symbols. In the horizon of that symbol pre-eminently that is the idea of limit. The limit is also what retains, contains something as a whole, inside a unity, that allows to be caught by a glance that, rather than piling up data in sight of a calculus, guesses a profile, in a single sight.

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Biography



Luigi A. Manfreda teaches theoretical philosophy at Rome University "Tor Vergata". He is the director of the magazines *il cannocchiale* and *Agalma*. Among his writings, *Tempo e redenzione. Linguaggio etico e forme dell'esperienza da Nietzsche a Simone Weil*, Jaca Book, Milan 2001, and *Il circolo e lo specchio. Sul fondamento in Hegel*, Il melangolo, Genoa 2012.