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THE POSTHUMAN CONDITION: AN INTRODUCTION

1. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE POSTHUMAN?

The use of Arendt's expression in the subtitle for this issue is quite deliberate. Indeed, a few decades ago, she called for a keener awareness of "what we are doing": that is, of the meaning, the consequences and the effect of our scientific, technological and social breakthroughs and achievements.

In fact, the "Promethean gap"¹, namely the "divide" between our technical ability to produce and our faculties of representation, imagination, feeling, and meaning attribution², is now increasingly likely to widen quickly, or, even worse, to be veiled by a technophilic ideological mantle.

The reference to Latour's chapter³ is also intentional, as the extension of agency from human beings to animals and things indifferently, although mostly taken for granted in the field of posthuman studies, may need further consideration⁴.

The aim of this issue is precisely to enter the debate while keeping a critical eye on both the tradition of humanism and the new wave of posthumanism.

A defensive, nostalgic stance against any questioning of the nature/culture boundaries is both pointless and unrealistic. But equally, the "cheery posthumanism" that seems to be emerging in many strands of contemporary debate, obliterating any doubt or hesitation as remnants of a past to simply discard, risks eliminating any possibility for critical analysis.

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¹ G. Anders, "Das Prometheische Gefälle", in *Die Antiquiertheit*, Vol. 1, 17-18. *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Band II: Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution*, Munich: Publisher C.H. Beck, 1956.

² As he said, "technology has now become the Subject of history, with which we are only still 'co-historical', mitgeschichtlich", *ibid.*, Vol. 2, 9.

³ "What Does It Mean To Be Modern?", in *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

⁴ One of the first scholars to point to the "agency" of objects was certainly McLuhan, when he said "the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is *introduced* into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology" (M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media* [1964], Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1994 (1964), 7, my emphasis). The "active" role of media appears again in the important definition "All media are *active metaphors* in their power to *translate* experience into new form", *ibid.*, p. 64. The idea of "technological mediation" is crucial in P.-P. Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, addressing the way in which technological artefacts co-shape human action and perception. Together with "agency" in terms of ability to mediate, "translation" is another crucial concept in McLuhan, one that is also central to Latour's theory. Yet the two scholars take very different positions regarding the implications in terms of human awareness and responsibility.

As regards the first aspect (nostalgia), there is a tendency to equate natural with human, on one hand, and artificial with inhuman, on the other. Yet a dichotomic and merely conservative view is untenable nowadays: even a Catholic authority such as philosopher and theologian Romano Guardini, in the mid 1920s, wrote “Look, we have never had any relation to nature in an untouched form”, while also recognizing that “longing for untouched nature is itself a product of culture originating in the over-artificiality of existence”⁵.

In other words, our being is “in a natural culture”⁶.

Today, that means that our “being human” is profoundly interwoven with – and affected by – technology, a factor that cannot be ignored. By the way, this is not in the least new: as early as the late sixties, McLuhan had provocatively – but in a sense prophetically – stated that “The new media are not bridges between man and nature; they *are* nature”⁷.

Today, biology and technology are no longer separate domains but combine in different ways, around us as well as within our bodies. Scholars in the field have variously termed this combination “hybrid”⁸ (Latour) or “compost” (Haraway)⁹.

At issue is not the combination, only its meaning and consequences.

Of the various problematic questions, we would like to address at least two.

The first concerns the implication of de-differentiation within the posthumanistic paradigm: a “post-anthropocentrism” that rejects any particular privileged position for *Homo sapiens*, seen rather as situated in a *continuum* in which humans are but one life form among many¹⁰. While it rightly criticizes the “tyrannical anthropocentrism” of Western humanism, it poses some difficulties when exploring the question of ethics and justice, rightly advocated as crucial by posthumanists such as Wolfe, Braidotti and Verbeek.

The second question considers whether there should be limits – and, if any, how they should be assessed, by whom, and according to which criteria – to the plasticity of technical intervention in human life, down to molecular level. This is what worries many scholars within the liberal tradition (including Fukuyama¹¹ and Habermas¹²).

But the question of limits is also one of the main concerns of authors such as Miguel Benasayag. In fact, while recognizing that “The boundaries between what is possible [what can be done] and its limits [what can be thought of as acceptable] move in relation to different situations and historical periods”, he also asserts very strongly that “A society for which anything thinkable is possible is destined to disappear”¹³.

2. OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD: BEYOND HUBRIS AND DUALISM

For the first aspect (posthumanism as a redefinition of humanity’s place in the world), some premises are relatively easily agreed. What can be questioned is rather that not a

⁵ R. Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como: Explorations in Technology and the Human Race*, Grand Rapids, Michigan US: Eerdmans, 1994, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ Now in E. McLuhan, F. Zingrone (eds.), *Essential McLuhan*, New York: Routledge, 1997, 272.

⁸ B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993 (or. ed. 1991), 51 ss.

⁹ “We Are All Compost, Not Posthuman”, in “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin”, *Environmental Humanities*, 6 (2015): 161.

¹⁰ See, for instance, C. Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, University of Minnesota Press, 2010 and R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

¹¹ F. Fukuyama, *Our Post-Human Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

¹² J. Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

¹³ M. Benasayag, G. Schmit, *Les passions tristes*, Paris: La Découverte, 2006, 92 and 94. My translation.

single order of consequences must follow from them, as seems often the case. Still other perspectives are possible beyond those indicated in what is now the mainstream literature on posthumanism: in particular, how the questions of equality and social justice advocated within posthumanist studies can adjust to the idea of autopoiesis and de-differentiation remains an open issue.

The “post” in posthuman is not simply chronological: we need a different basis for our self-understanding from the idea of Vitruvian man, at the centre of the universe and fully in control of it. The implication is not necessarily “superseding the human”¹⁴, i.e. the complete dismissal of the human subject, as even one of the most influential post-human-studies scholars admits. Indeed, even Braidotti says, “I want to keep an equal distance from both the humanistic assumptions of the universal value of the unitary subject and the extreme forms of science-driven posthumanism which dismiss the need for a subject altogether”¹⁵.

What is at stake, therefore?

Putting “humans at the pinnacle” has indeed fostered a tyrannical anthropocentrism, where freedom is equated with total sovereignty and endless manipulation of the world.

Egregious social inequalities, climate change, high levels of pollution, a scarcity of basic common goods, and concentration of wealth are but few of the side effects of this reckless supremacy of the few.

By now, there is broad endorsement across the board for the critique of this model, along with the need to rethink our place in the world. Last but not least, even Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si* criticizes the ‘anthropocentric excess’ of modernity (116). He also mentions the risks of a “misguided” or “tyrannical anthropocentrism” (118; 122) and lambasts the idea of domination: “the Church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinated to the good of human beings, as if they have no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish” (69).

In other words, the critique of modern anthropocentrism is not the prerogative of a materialistic perspective, and fruitful alliances can be built, as is often the case, to solve specific problems.

Rethinking our place in the world in a less abstract and individualistic way is becoming increasingly urgent, as the ideal of individualism is now clearly a spent force for many¹⁶, as is the kind of abstract universalism that has actually legitimated injustice and domination. As Hayles put it, “the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead *the end of a certain conception of the human*, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice”¹⁷.

Chiming with this view is Wolfe: “Posthumanism in my sense isn’t posthuman at all – in the sense of being ‘after’ our embodiment has been transcended – but it is only posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself”¹⁸.

There is also a broad convergence in the critical stance on dualism, even beyond the

¹⁴ K. Hayles, *How we Became Posthuman*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 283.

¹⁵ Braidotti, *On Posthuman*, 102.

¹⁶ Braidotti, among others, asserts this point strongly.

¹⁷ K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 286, my emphasis.

¹⁸ C. Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, xv.

nature/culture dilemma, which is also a tenet of posthumanism: “a dualistic approach, which rests on the binary opposition between the given and the constructed, is currently being replaced by a non-dualistic understanding of nature–culture interaction”¹⁹.

In fact, in the name of ‘clear and distinct ideas’ within Descartes’ legacy, a line of separation – which has then become one of opposition – has been drawn in modernity between nature and culture, mind and body, self and other, *logos* and *pathos*, the organic and the technological, matter and spirit, and control and chance that needs to be questioned.

In Latour’s terms, shifting from distinction and “purification” to translation and mediation now seems an essential move to make²⁰. The former movement (distinction) is one of abstraction and disembodiment²¹; the latter (translation), one of re-embedding in the concreteness of life (the “concrete-living”, in Guardini’s words).

Such unhealthy dualism is heavily criticized within the posthumanistic paradigm, and this is indeed a crucial, much-needed shared step in the *pars destruens* advanced by posthumanism.

But do the dismissal of tyrannical anthropocentrism, on one hand, and the refusal of dualism, on the other, lead directly to the de-differentiation and erasure of any ontological divide between living human beings and non-living things, including machines? The conviction that “everything in the world is connected” is not the same as endorsing a “non-human subjectivity” (“subjectivity is not the exclusive prerogative of anthropos”)²².

Is the recognition of a “subjectivity” of things the necessary condition for treating them with respect? Experience suggests not, as human beings themselves are so often treated like means to an end, exploited and disrespected.

Non-dualism is not necessarily the same as non-difference or equivalence. There is a gap that needs to be examined and investigated.

Is “difference” necessarily synonymous with “discrimination” and “inequality”? Is de-differentiation, i.e. equivalence (indifference to difference, which is but another form of abstraction), the only way to guarantee justice? Even monism can be ideological and blind to the concreteness of reality in its multifaceted expressions, which are not at all equivalent.

In other words, the alternative to anthropocentrism is not necessarily materialism, biocentrism or the equivalence of any autopoietic system.

Is a perspective based on “zoocentred egalitarianism”²³ actually tenable? Are we then retreating to the same “law of nature” that is heavily criticized as conservative? Is “randomness” as opposed to “teleology” the real solution for emancipation? At least two problems arise: in a technocratic system, randomness is at least “piloted”²⁴; and the only solution to dualism is not necessarily to suppress one pole of the duality while absolu-

¹⁹ Braidotti, *On Posthuman*, 3.

²⁰ Latour, *We have Never Been Modern*, 11.

²¹ These are premises of dehumanization, with its devastating consequences seen in the 20th century: see, among others, Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.

²² Also see “We need to visualize the subject as a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole, and to do so within an understandable language”. Braidotti, *On Posthuman*, 82.

²³ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁴ Among the critics of the techno-utopia – seeing more freedom in the new “randomness” – see E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, New York: Perseus, 2011.

tizing the other²⁵, which is rather a “mortification” of complexity²⁶. Although it is more evident for religious fundamentalism, the same is probably true even for the exclusively material positions: every form of exclusivism is dangerous and can pave the way to all harmful dogmatisms.

Overcoming the principle of “distinction” based on purity, culminating in opposition and “incommensurability”, does not necessarily entail a disembedded universalism nor, again, the blurring of any difference: a “desegregation of categories” can be a necessary step in the deconstruction process, but it can also end in new equally tyrannical categories. It is not at all unrealistic that inequality and violence manifest in the “chaosmos”²⁷ succeeding the “humanistic cosmos” new form of power.

In sum, while there is broad agreement on anti-individualistic and anti-tyrannical premises, perhaps the *pars costruens* still needs work so as not to fall into the “oppositional fallacy”, as the opposite of bad is not necessarily good.

Perhaps we could say that being human in the age of posthumanism means rethinking freedom in a condition of non-sovereignty, as Arendt suggested many years ago, without necessarily leaning towards either complete de-differentiation and equivalence or chaos as the way to escape oppressive order.

We can be different in a hierarchical way, which leads to domination and exploitation. Or we can take the recognition of differences, within the global interconnectedness, as a principle calling for respect and responsibility. Humanity can rule the universe, in thrall to our own *hubris*, or we can look after and take care of it by placing a limit on sovereignty, in recognition of alterity and interdependency. Ultimately, that is not too far from many posthumanistic positions and is not at all incompatible with “an increase in vigilance, responsibility and humility that accompanies living in a world so newly and differently inhabited”²⁸.

In addition, the definition of life as autopoiesis (as in Varela, Marturana, Latour and others) seems problematic, especially when it ends in what Guattari calls “machinic autopoiesis”: “Guattari moves beyond the distinction proposed by Varela by extending the principle of autopoiesis (which for Varela is reserved for the biological organisms) to cover also the machines or technological others. Another name for subjectivity, according to Guattari, is autopoietic subjectivation, or self-styling, and it accounts both for living organisms, humans as self-organizing systems, and also for inorganic matter, the machines”²⁹. The idea of *auto-poiesis* seems to replace that of *auto-nomy*. Is this a posthuman version of the self-made man? And what if the problems concerned the *autós* rather than the *nòmos*?

How, indeed, can autopoiesis combine with the most called-for “basic principles of social justice, the respect for human decency and diversity, the rejection of false universalisms; the affirmation of the value of difference; the principles of academic freedom, anti-racism, openness to others and conviviality?”³⁰. Moreover, while it is by no means

²⁵ In this regard, I found that Guardini’s idea of “polar opposition” – between opposites that are in conflict yet also refer to each other – is more dynamic and takes closer account of complexity and of the need to understand it.

²⁶ While, in Braidotti’s words, we need to take complexity seriously and “To undertake a leap forward into the complexities and paradoxes of our times” (Braidotti, *On Posthuman*, 54).

²⁷ F. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

²⁸ P.-P. Verbeek, *What Things Do. Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, 47.

²⁹ Braidotti, *On Posthuman*, 94.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

clear on which grounds justice and respect can be promoted without an idea of what “good life” is, there is still room, at least in principle, for a non-tyrannical humanism³¹. In Braidotti’s words, “Although I am inclined towards anti-humanism, I have no difficulty in recognizing that these ideals are perfectly compatible with the best humanist values”³².

We certainly agree that good life is not tyrannical humanity keeping the world at our disposal. But recognizing interconnection and blurring of boundaries may not be enough. Justice is not autopoietic, nor is freedom or criticism.

Even if overcoming any dualism can indeed be a necessary step, therefore, it is still only the beginning: on one hand, blurring differences risks imposing equivalence and indistinction in a way that resembles a new ideological construct; on the other, it prevents the crucial question of whether it is acceptable to manipulate even down to molecular level from being posed. And the question of limits calls for a responsible subjectivity, taking responsibility for action in a context where there are no guarantees.

In blurring differences, the posthuman paradigm distances itself from any idea of recognition, which in turn relies on the idea of alterity, of the “other” as a limit to my own tyranny (I can do whatever I want, but I stop here, Ricoeur said). It is the other standing before me and saying, even without words and with all nuances of meaning, “don’t kill me”.

I see difficulties in finding a different terrain for social justice in this human (even before than humanistic) paradigm. For, in Wolfe’s words, upon which we can agree, we must get rid of humanism without obliterating the human.

Maybe the way to a non-tyrannical humanism is twofold: to reject the means/ends logic, as Arendt says, the instrumental logic in which every end becomes a means to another, in an interminable chain; and to recognize that we have always been relational subjects, and we depend on others and vice versa, where “otherness” is the principle of self-limitation and responsibility.

Within the instrumental logic, in fact, everything in the world, including people, is seen as “the huge arsenal of the given from which *Homo faber* selects freely his means to pursue his ends”³³.

In sum, the aim of this issue is precisely to enter the debate while maintaining a critical stance. We assume, with Braidotti and many other critical scholars, that European humanism is heavily anthropocentric and that it culminated in a form of tyrannical domination and reckless exploitation of the world. But this does not necessarily lead us to an unproblematic, enthusiastic embrace of the more radical tenants of posthumanism³⁴, namely the complete equivalence between human and non-human beings and the question of the limits to what can be achieved through technique.

³¹ In which *aidos*, i.e. respect, gratitude and a sense of limits, prevails over *hubris*, i.e. arrogance, will to power, and violence.

³² Braidotti, *On Posthuman*, 11.

³³ “Here it is indeed true that the end justifies the means; it does more, it produces and organizes them. The end justifies the violence done to nature to win the material, as the wood justifies killing the tree and the table justifies destroying the wood”, Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 153 and 155.

³⁴ As Braidotti herself recognizes, “The debates in mainstream culture range from hard-nosed business discussion of robotics, prosthetic technologies, neurosciences and bio-genetic capital to fuzzier new age visions of trans-humanism and techno-transcendence”: *On Posthuman*, 2.

3. THE QUESTION OF LIMITS

The question of limits is indeed another problematic aspect that needs to be addressed within a critical perspective on both tyrannical humanism and radical posthumanism.

In fact, we face a kind of paradox within posthuman studies.

On one hand, the removal of limits as a “border”, a dividing line between humanity and “the rest” that justifies exploitation, is seen as a step towards a more harmonious and respectful world. Blurring distinctions is a way not only to overcome dualism but also to recognize how different realms are intertwined³⁵.

On the other hand, an exclusively negative consideration of limits as either boundaries of division or impediments to individual freedom has produced a world in which any limitation is bad and must be overcome. But this means returning to a condition in which there is no limit to the manipulation of the world, only that the main “agent” is no longer humanity, but the techno-economic system.

Even in a secularized world, perhaps only “otherness” (implying difference, which is rather denied by equivalence) can offer a positive limitation to the limitless possibilities of manipulation.

The posthuman fusion of equivalence (in the name of harmony and against tyranny) and a rejection of any limitation (in the name of both a radical individualism and a material monism that recognizes no external order) paradoxically results in an even stronger form of tyranny. Hence, while liberal thinkers like Habermas and Fukuyama call for normative limits to manipulation, which is all but a promoter of equality, posthuman thinkers seem to embrace the right to endless manipulation in the name of the rejection of any limit and distinction ultimately; then, even more tyrannically than in traditional humanism, human life is treated as infinitely malleable.

What “ableism” means in the age of enhancement has become a crucial question, as the line itself between healing and enhancement has already faded, and today normality itself is open to medical modification³⁶.

Habermas was one of the most committed and determined supporters of a clear-cut distinction, particularly as far as molecular biopolitics is concerned, between “negative” (prevention of disease) and “positive” eugenics (as “optimization of genetic makeup”)³⁷.

According to Habermas³⁸, the “new structure of attribution resulting from obliterating the boundary between persons and things”³⁹ goes hand in hand with positive eugenics: that is, from the practice of healing to the government of life. In his influential essay, the author explores the new post-metaphysical ethics as a form of self-understanding

³⁵ By recognizing the increasing indistinguishability of humans and machines, Arendt in a sense anticipated both the cyborg and the posthuman world: “The natural processes on which it [the world of machines] feeds increasingly relate it to the biological process itself, so that the apparatuses we once handled freely begin to look as though they were shells belonging to the human body as the shell belongs to the body of a turtle. Seen from the vantage point of this development, technology in fact no longer appears as the product of a conscious human effort to enlarge material power, but rather like a biological development of mankind in which the innate structures of the human organism are transplanted in an ever-increasing measure into the environment of man”. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 153.

³⁶ N. Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton University Press, 2006. On this topic, see especially part 2 of this issue.

³⁷ Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 22.

³⁸ But see also, among others, F. Fukuyama, *Our Post-Human Future*; L. Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002.

³⁹ Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 13.

that “thereby dissolves the context that first linked moral judgement with the motivation to right action”⁴⁰.

Habermas views “unforeseeability” as a condition for egalitarianism⁴¹, while genetic manipulation is fully consistent with the individualistic and egalitarian logic of “self-optimization” (p. 20), for “successfully being oneself” (p. 15). Not to mention the risks that science becomes suborned in the service of profit and that less appealing factors affecting most people’s health are neglected in the search for treatments for the few that will advance careers and generate profit. Consequently, thinking about limits means thinking if and where a point of “inviolability” can be recognized.

More deeply, Habermas recognizes that “shifting the line between chance and choice affects the self-understanding of persons who act on moral grounds and are concerned about their life *as a whole*” (p. 28).

The question is “whether, and if so how, the implementation of these achievements affects our self-understanding as responsible agents”⁴².

And even if a call for an “ethics of robots” is already on the posthuman agenda, in what sense can we talk about the responsibility of objects or machines? Is “responsibility” a notion that we must discard as specifically human?

If we are not sovereign, if tyranny is to be rejected, then the endless manipulation of life should also be heavily criticized.

As Arendt put it, freedom is not sovereignty (as the perspective of individualized humanism still maintains): “If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality”⁴³.

The challenge, then, is how to reconcile the non-equivalence of human beings with their lack (and refusal) of sovereignty: “The question which then arises is [...] whether the capacity for action does not harbor within itself certain potentialities which enable it to survive the disabilities of non-sovereignty”⁴⁴.

A non-disguised anthropocentrism can be foreseen in which both the plurality of beings (i.e. their non-equivalence and non-indifference) is recognized and human beings exert their peculiar power, their capacity for action (for creating something new, outside determinism, or, in other words, for actively contributing to the emergence of the new) in the form of responsibility – positively, in taking care of the world, and negatively, in setting limits to their own power to manipulate, particularly in treating human life as raw material to be exploited.

4. ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Technological artefacts that only 20 years ago were but evocative objects that made scholars worry – or triggered their techno-utopian imagination – have now become part of our everyday lives: from artificial implants to mass cosmetic surgery and body ma-

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4. In that sense, artificiality is problematic not per se but because of the level of abstraction that it implies.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13. See Pappin, in this issue, for the “partisanship” of posthumanism.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 12. It also runs contrary to Article 3 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, see *ibid.*, 15.

⁴³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 235-236.

nipulation, from new forms of permanent media interconnection to interaction with artificial intelligences.

Various new questions therefore arise that call for interdisciplinary perspectives.

Is the posthuman a highly evolved point along that line where the human is merely a lower, hierarchically inferior stage to be abandoned? Does “post” suggest a project to radically overcome the human condition? Or, rather, does it open a way to reframe the discourse on “humanity” within the new technological conditions, without ruling out the development of a new humanism, one that is less Western, male-centred and tyrannical? Is there room for a critical perspective that is not only committed to defending the past but willing to dialogue with the present?

Are the only conceivable alternatives either to defend the status quo or to completely dismiss it? How is it possible to rethink the meaning of “being human” today, without falling in the trap of such an alternative? Will the merging of the human and the technological erode any concept of human nature, or is it actually calling for a necessary redefinition?

Is removing any limit of what can be called “human” a real step towards freedom or rather a way to infinite manipulation?

Moreover, can our body become an impediment to enhancement? Is total disembodiment the path to freedom that we are looking for? Was that not the same principle that drove the financialization of the world economy? A process whose effects we could recognize as dehumanizing, but were unable to critically examine the process of abstraction underlying it.

Perhaps a new dualism is in the ascendant, in which the body is actually an impediment not to the “spirit”, as it was in the past, but to power and its unlimited development: a brake both on reality augmented by technique and on the economy boosted by finance.

A new social imperative seems to be emerging, based on enhancement at all costs.

Nowadays, when technology is no longer a tool, or even just an environment, but is wearable and incorporated and can act retroactively on our actual physical structure, what are the main narratives for making sense of the new human condition?

How do the two main lines – of healing (diminishing suffering, preventing disease, and compensating for impairments) and enhancing (overcoming any kind of limit, indefinitely increasing power, and potentially creating life and attaining immortality) – relate and intersect in contemporary public discourse?

Might it be legitimate or even desirable to place a limit on enhancement? And how might we define it? According to which criteria?

To what extent does enhancing through technique feed a consumerist individualism that is completely instrumental to techno-capitalism while claiming to increase the freedom of choice? Are we becoming less dependent on human beings and more on technical systems?

Is enhancing through technique the individualistic alternative to enhancing through sharing and social bonds?

Is there any room for a kind of thinking that is not technocratic?

This issue attempts to address at least some of those questions.

In line with the Journal’s tradition, the issue is international and interdisciplinary. From different theoretical perspectives and disciplinary fields, ranging from sociology and semiotics to theology, the essays consider several crucial questions surrounding our collective living in the age of posthumanism, facing new challenges to which the traditional answers no longer work.

The contributions fall into three sections.

The first, *The Posthuman Condition: Living in a Brave New World*, echoes both Arendt and Huxley in suggesting a critical perspective that remains open to new possibilities of being human. The essays' scope is broad, embracing different spheres relevant to the public domain and our collective life: politics (Pappin), work (Mazali), religion (Vaccaro, Okey), the fashionable body (Calefato), digital language and networked ecological awareness (Takehana), and art in the techno-capitalist society (Federici).

A second section, *Bodies in Question/Questioning Bodies* focuses more on the redefinition of the ableism-disability relationship (and the resulting problematic redefinition of "ableism" itself, see Eggleston) in light of the typical posthuman question of healing-enhancement. To what extent does healing produce a "normalizing attitude" based on standards that are only apparently universal (Spöhrer)? How do non-standard bodies challenge our idea of normality and subjectivity (Kerns)? Moreover, can the way in which increasingly sophisticated scanning machines offer a new insight into our brain influence our understanding of ourselves and our diseases (Barber-Stetson)?

The third section, *Representations/Imaginaries*, is a response of sorts to Latour's invitation: "we are going to have to slow down, reorient and regulate the proliferation of monsters by representing their existence officially"⁴⁵, in considering the different narratives, in traditional and digital media, that contribute today to build a new anthropo-technical imaginary in the public sphere, to drive the domestication of enhancing technologies, and to shape the social practices related to augmented experience.

In particular, it addresses the way in which the *topos* of enhancement has been dealt with by fictional (but not exclusively: see Shaeffer) texts over time, from early television (Pagnoni) to cinema (Richter) up to web series (Joyce). It highlights the shift from the "alien" as an enemy outside us to digital technology augmenting our bodily and mental power (as with female cyborgs).

Overall, the contributions seem to suggest that technical enhancement is not always, and not necessarily, the best solution. In any case, being human also means being free to decide whether to be enhanced by technical devices.

A critical stance does not imply resistance to change. As Guardini put it, "totally technical events and unleashed forces can be mastered only by a new human attitude that is a match for them. We must put mind, spirit and freedom to work afresh. But we must relate this new effort to the new events"⁴⁶.

Hence, "we must not oppose what is new and try to preserve a beautiful world that is inevitably perishing"⁴⁷. Especially since, for many, the world that is perishing is not that beautiful but is rather a place of inequalities, exploitation and domination.

On the contrary, a positively critical presence is what we are trying to suggest here as the way to live in our posthumanistic era, as "there is a *yes* to what is happening historically that is a decision because it springs from a knowing heart. Such a *yes* has a weight. Our place is in what is evolving"⁴⁸.

A short final note. A book presented recently in Milan tells the story of a group of people – ex-terrorists (mainly from Italian Red Brigades, who in 1978 kidnapped and killed then prime minister Aldo Moro) and victims of terrorism (who lost relatives in explosions such as the "Piazza Della Loggia" massacre in 1974 and other tragic acts of political violence) – who secretly met for seven years, accompanied by a small team of

⁴⁵ Latour, *We have Never Been Modern*, 12.

⁴⁶ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 80.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

professionals working for “reparative justice”⁴⁹. In the end, they decided to “come out”, as a way to testify that an “impossible dialogue” has in fact been possible, in spite of the exhaustion, frustration and sense of impotence that accompanied it. A testimony that seeing the face of the other can help overcome the dependency on hate and resentment. And that justice can be more than simply administering the deserved penalty, within a technical system of exchanges.

Terrorism in Italy was an autopoietic system with a (political) lexicon, some devices (light low-cost weapons) and a media system acting as an amplifier⁵⁰: ultimately, nobody was free to choose, within that system.

On the contrary, those people’s seven-year effort can hardly be interpreted within the autopoietic paradigm, which rather pushed them towards resentment and a thirst for revenge.

There is an act of individual responsibility: we can call it freedom. It never happens in a vacuum, but it is never simply the by-product of the system. There is a “gap” that cannot be explained, let alone created, but only explored, which is precisely where we can try to understand what “being human” can mean, today as ever.

Milan, October 2015

⁴⁹ G. Bertagna, A. Ceretti, C. Mazzucato (eds.), *Il libro dell'incontro. Vittime e responsabili della lotta armata a confronto*, Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2015.

⁵⁰ To the point that even McLuhan commented on the Italian case, saying that the best thing would have been “to unplug”.