Giuseppe Mari

Posthumanism: a Danger, Opportunity and Challenge

Giuseppe Mari
Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy

Posthumanism:
a Danger, Opportunity and Challenge

Posthumanizm:
zagrożenie, możliwość i wyzwanie

ABSTRACT

A tendency towards posthumanism is on the increase today. The author of the article aims to analyse the issue in order to provide a critical interpretation, offering a short description of the phenomenon, a key concept (freedom) useful in addressing the problem, and a concrete perspective in order to face up to and accept its challenge. In other words: the author of the contribution rejects posthumanism because it is in opposition to humanism and suggests embracing neohumanism as the ethical improvement of human behaviour related principally to education, and not simply to technical progress. The main principle is that human beings are ends, not means of all activities aiming at enhancement of human capacities.

ABSTRAKT

Współcześnie coraz wyraźniejsza wydaje się być tendencja zmierzania ku posthumanizmowi. W artykule autor stara się analizować tę problematykę z zamiarem przedstawienia krytycznej interpretacji oraz zaproponowania krótkiego opisu fenomenu posthumanizmu, kluczowego pojęcia (wolność) przydatnego do analizy tego problemu,

Articles and Dissertations

oraz konkretnej perspektywy, aby móc w ten sposób stawić czoło temu
fenomenowi oraz przyjąć wyzwanie jakie on niesie. Innymi słowy: autor
artykułu odrzuca posthumanizm, ponieważ stoi on w opozycji do huma-
nizmu, oraz sugeruje przyjęcie neohumanizmu jako sposobu etyczne-
go poprawiania ludzkiego zachowania, co jest zasadniczo powiązane
z edukacją, a nie bezpośrednio z postępem technologicznym. Podsta-
wową zasadą jest zatem założenie, że ludzie stanowią cele, a nie środ-
ki wszelkich działań zmierzających do poszerzania ludzkich możliwości.

A tendency towards posthumanism is on the increase today. I aim
in this article to analyse this issue in order to provide a critical inter-
pretation including:
(a) a short description of the phenomenon;
(b) a key concept (freedom) useful in addressing the problem;
(c) a concrete perspective enabling us to face up to and accept its
   challenge.

What is Posthumanism?

Nowadays "Posthumanism" can be identified as a composite
group of cultural tendencies whose defining characteristic is to cri-
ticise and overturn the traditional humanistic perspective.[1] Friedrich
Nietzsche stands at the posthumanistic starting point because it was
he who first said that the "Human being is something that must be
overcome."[2] This statement—coming from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—
is very clear: the human being is old and outdated; for this reason it is
necessary to go beyond the human creature and to aspire to the *Über-
mensch*. What does this mean? That the human being is something in

---

[1]   See as an introduction: *Posthumanism*, ed. N. Badmington, New York 2000;
     F. Fukuyama, *Our Posthumanistic Future*, London 2002; R. Pepperell, *The
     Posthuman Condition*, Bristol 2003; A. Miah, "Posthumanism: A Criti-
     cal History", in: *Medical Enhancements and Posthumanity*, eds. B. Gordijn,
     R. Chadwick, New York 2007, pp. 71–94; C. Wolfe, *What is Posthuman-
     ism?*, Minneapolis 2010; P. MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics*, London 2012;
     S. Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, London 2013; P.K. Nayar, *Posthumanism*,
     Cambridge 2013.

[2]   F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Cambridge 2006, p. 5.

transition rather than a final destination: "Mankind is a rope fastened between animal and overman—a rope over an abyss."[3] Why such a harsh judgement? Because, according to Nietzsche, the humanistic civilization—as a "human centred" civilization—has radically failed: it promised to reach perfection, but the human being is still far from perfect. In fact, the humanistic civilization was underpinned by the ancient Greek (Platonic) culture and the Christian (modern) civilization, but—again according to Nietzsche—they both distracted mankind from the very human goal of ruling the world and diverted it to another spiritual destination: Platonic "hyperuranion" or the Christian "kingdom of heaven." For this reason, the philosopher urges: "I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth and do not believe those who speak to you of extraterrestrial hopes!"[4] Nietzsche thinks that there are two basic guidelines: to be inspired by the animals in the task of being loyal to the terrestrial condition (Zarathustra allows animals to lead him[5]) or by people who are engaged in learning how to overcome human nature.[6]

Chronologically we are now distant from Nietzsche's work, but actually we are contemporary from a cultural point of view. In fact, never have posthumanistic tendencies been as strong as today. Nowadays we can recognise two guidelines suggested by Nietzsche both at work: on one hand, the appreciation of animal identity in order to make clear the human one; on the other, the interference by technical means into human life. Of course, I am not against animal welfare or technical assistance for people. I merely wish to show that it is dangerous to treat animals and human beings as equal, just as it is dangerous not to set limits to technical power over human life. Both are tendencies supported by the posthumanistic point of view. Let's examine the issue.

"Zooanthropology," one of whose main supporters is Roberto Marchesini, features prominently in posthumanistic topics. Marchesini focuses on the subject of "alterity" between human and animal identity and emphasises "the revolution in alterity that has

---

3 Ibidem, p. 7.

4 Ibidem, p. 6.

5 Ibidem, p. 15.

6 Ibidem, pp. 7–8.

characterized the last 50 years," opening the way for pluralism. In particular, he speaks about the importance assigned to "diversity" within the settlement of identity and the acknowledgement of a new "pluralistic" ontology as opposed to the former "universalistic" one. Marchesini infers:

> Here, in my opinion, may be found the true crisis of humanistic thought: alterity has begun to reveal its plurality, thereby becoming unresponsive to every attempt at compression in a single category opposed to humanity. This is not a total collapse of the concept of identity […], but rather of a concept of identity […] which brings us back to the dichotomy of human and non-human. We might think this dichotomy is the bastion of defence for human rights, but in reality it is the archetype for every form of discrimination among human beings.[7]

This point is very interesting. According to Marchesini, the demarcation line between "human" and "non-human" has produced discrimination among human beings.[8] I think that this is very hard to agree with: in fact this anthropocentrism has caused problems (as I'll say later), but not to humanity, only around it, for example between human beings and their ecosystem. When human beings discriminate against each other, it happens because of a lack of universality, not because of an excess of it!

On the other hand, the posthumanistic attitude is related to the growth of technical powers. One of the first proponents of this is Donna Haraway who published *A Cyborg Manifesto*. She has also been inspired in this by social topics, in particular the issue of feminism. She wants to show that there is no human identity without a social context and that we all are subject to change, as it is clear looking at the cyborg that this creature created through technical power embodies a new comprehension of human identity. She says:

> By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transfor-

---

[7]   R. Marchesini, "Alterity and the Non-Human", *Humanimalia* 2010, no. 2, pp. 93–94; See also R. Marchesini, S. Tonutti, *Manuale di zooantropologia*, Roma 2007.

[8]   Ibidem.

mation. In the traditions of 'Western' science and politics […] the relation between organism and machine has been a border war.[9]

Now—Haraway emphasizes—the relationship between the human being and technical power has become fundamental: it's the *Übermensch* becoming reality, I would add.

These two opposing tendencies—the return to nature by Marchesini and the artificial mutation by Haraway—have something in common: to leave behind human identity as something that it is better to lose than to gain. They are two different trends, but they pursue the same aim: to destroy the humanistic way of thinking and living. Why? The reason is simple. At the heart of the humanistic *Weltanschauung* is the recognition of the difference between the human being and all other beings in the world, marked by the responsibility that each man/woman has towards him/herself and the rest of mankind. How can we criticize Marchesini's theories? By observing that "ethology" and "ethics" are totally different ways of looking at animal and human behaviour respectively. The first word identifies animal behaviour as subject to natural needs, while the second one identifies human behaviour as open to judgment and deliberate selection, because of our possession of freedom. How can we criticize Haraway's mindset? By observing the same difference in the comparison between "technique" and "technology". In fact, the first word identifies the ability to produce something useful as it applies both to animals and human beings. By contrast, the second word—being related also to the ability to express knowledge as valuable in itself—is typically human. We must not forget that the human race identifies itself as *homo sapiens sapiens*. To refer to the Latin verb *sapio* means to recognise as peculiar to mankind not only the ability to do something useful (Greek *téchne*), but also—and principally—the ability to know the reason why it is useful (Greek *epistéme*): in fact, this is the meaning of Latin *sapientia* (wisdom). At the root of human uniqueness there is freedom. Both words—wis*dom* and free*dom*—are related to the concept of self-dominion. As a matter of fact, to be human means to have a distinctive and original dignity, that is to be intrinsically of value because of self-dominion (Greek *egkráteia*). I will now focus on this particular issue because it is essential in order to face the posthumanist challenge.

---

[9] D. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", in: D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*, New York 1991, p. 150.

Freedom and Humanism

Since the beginning of Western philosophy, whether the human being is free or not has been the subject of discussion. It is easy to recognise that every time we say something in favour of freedom, it is possible to say the opposite too. For example, we can say that the human being is free because acts intentionally, but we can say—at the same time—that actions are influenced by environmental factors. What is the significance of this? Why didn't the deterministic theory prevail? Because no-one was ever able to predict human decisions perfectly.

It is interesting to consider the origins of human sciences, for example psychology and sociology. At first both started under the positivistic paradigm: in the first case, Wilhelm Wundt's reductionism; in the second, Émile Durkheim's study of "social facts." Later, after a short period of time, psychology developed "Gestalt theory" and sociology began to study "social actions" because of the new approach introduced by Max Weber: both cultural tendencies show that anthropology must consider the existence of freedom as an original human feature—the human being is free, and this is why we are active in the face of the environmental context as both the Gestalt and the Weberian approaches assert.

The most ancient source in pedagogical literature is *The Iliad*. In the Homeric poem we are told that Chiron was Achilles' educator. Who is Chiron? He is a centaur, a creature half-man and half-animal. Perhaps this is the most ancient testimony of humans' deep ambiguity. Chiron is Achilles' educator because he teaches the young hero to be able to favour the best side of his talent over the worst (the bestial side). Within another ancient book—the Bible—it is written that the "designs" of the human heart "are hidden" (Ps 64:6) because it can lead both to good and to evil. The Bible and Western philosophy make use of the metaphor of "two paths" in front of the human being. On one side, the subject is morally connoted: "See, I have today set before you life and good, death and evil" (Deut 30:15, NABRE); on the other, it also concerns knowledge, as occurs in the poem *On Nature* by Parmenides of Elea (fr. 3): "Come now, I will tell you […] about those ways of enquiry which are alone conceivable. The one, that a thing is, and that it is not for not being […]; the other,

that a thing is not, and that it must need not be."[10] The same subject prevails in the most ancient moral tale in the Western tradition, that is *The Choice of Hercules*. The story takes place "When Hercules was passing from boyhood to youth's state, when young people, now becoming their own masters, show whether they will approach life by the path of virtue or the path of vice."[11] In this situation two young and beautiful women approach him (obviously the plot can also be told from the feminine point of view). They are "Vice" and "Virtue," engaged to make Hercules choose between them. The first draws him in by promising many pleasures; the second does the same but makes him think about the satisfaction related to doing what is good. Up to this point, there is nothing remarkable. But, in Virtue's speech, there is something interesting when—twice—she recalls Hercules' parents to his mind. Why the reference to the hero's genealogy? Because it is as if to say: "Remind who you are."[12] The reference point to making the right choice is to make the choice most consistent with our identity. The human being is intrinsically a good thing, that's the strong notion underlying all humanism. As free beings, each man/woman must choose only the best side of him/herself in order to become what he/she must be because humanity is—at the same time—both fact and action, something we are and something we become, dignity and task. This is the very meaning of the word "*respons*ibility," that not only are we able to choose, but principally we are able to choose only the things which deserve our choice because through our choice we respond—correspond—to who we are.

At this point humanism comes into play. In fact, the word "humanism" means—originally—to consider the human being as the centre of all creation. This was not always the case. At the beginning of civilization the situation was reversed: the human creature was second to the animals. For example, if we think of Ancient Egyptian theology then it was clearly zoomorphic rather than anthropomorphic. The same was true in the religious system of the Ancient Greeks,

---

[10] Parmenides, *The Fragments of Parmenides*, ed. A.H. Coxon, Las Vegas – Zurich – Athens 2009, p. 56.

[11] Ibidem.

[12] See Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, II, 1, in: Xenophon, *Memorabilia. Oeconomicus. Symposium. Apology*, transl. E.C. Macrhant, O.J. Todd, ed. J. Henderson, Cambridge (MA) – London 2013, pp. 109–113.

as confirmed by the *Iliad*, where it is said that Athena is the goddess with "owl eyes" and that Hera is the goddess with "cow eyes." The situation is similar in shamanic religions: men and women dress up as animals because of the magical powers accorded to natural creatures and because—in ancient times—human life depended completely on animals not only for food, but also with primitive men and women needing animal furs to cover themselves and animal bones to provide their tools. Over time, human self-consciousness grew and came to recognise human originality. The biblical doctrine about man and woman's being created "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27) is the turning point, well expressed by Adam who is unable to find a partner among the animals (Gen 2:20). In fact, it was the biblical-Christian revelation to make human dignity fully recognised. Before this, within Greek civilization, the human being was called *mikrokosmos*, which means to recognise the human creature as the world order (*kósmos*) in miniature. It is only partially coherent with humanism, because it is subject to the primacy of nature: Greek civilization wasn't anthropocentric, it was "physiocentric" (from *phýsis*, "nature"). Clearly Church Fathers recognised this problem. For example, Gregory of Nyssa says:

> 1. Let us now resume our consideration of the Divine word, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'. How mean and how unworthy of the majesty of man are the fancies of some pagan writers, who magnify humanity, as they supposed, by their comparison of it to this world! For they say that man is microcosm, composed of the same elements with the universe. Those who bestow on human nature such praise as this by a high-sounding name, forget that they are dignifying man with the attributes of the gnat and the mouse: for they too are composed of these four elements—because assuredly about the animated nature of every existing thing we behold a part, greater or less, of those elements without which it is not natural that any sensitive being should exist. What great thing is there, then, in man's being accounted a representation and likeness of the world—of the heaven that passes away, of the earth that changes, of all things that they contain, which pass away with the departure of that which compasses them round?
>
> 2. In what then does the greatness of man consist, according to the doctrine of the Church? Not in his likeness to the created world, but in his being in the image of the nature of the Creator.[13]

---

[13] Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man", XVI, transl. H.A. Wilson, in: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series II, vol. 5, eds. P. Schaff, H. Wace, Oxford – London 1893, p. 404.

In fact, Greek civilization didn't recognise humankind's very originality. Greek culture didn't recognise it in all men and women, as Aristotle clearly testifies by referring to the human being as *lógos* owner and—some lines below—to the slave as *ktema*[14] ("property"). This happened because, from the qualitative point of view, no difference was recognised between man (*mikrokosmos*) and animals in nature (*makrokosmos*).

Certainly, over the centuries, humanism produced questionable (sometimes negative) effects too, but these aren't sufficient to reject its value. Putting humankind at the centre has led to conduct damaging to nature, the environmental balance and sustainability, but I do not believe that any abuse can justify the rejection of humanism; on the contrary, I think that it is necessary to promote the development of humanism not beyond itself, but within itself. From this point of view, posthumanistic tendencies are a challenge that we must take on.

The dangers and challenges of posthumanist tendencies

I have discussed about abuses perpetrated in the name of humanism and anthropocentrism because I think that they may explain the birth of posthumanist tendencies. I do not think that the abuses justify a rejection of humanism: instead they should impress on us the need to delve further into the humanistic point of view. In fact, we should be aware that humanism is a "work in progress." To give an example: more than thirty-three centuries ago, in ancient Egypt, the "Nefertiti bust" was sculpted, reproducing a portrait of the Egyptian queen Nefertiti. This is housed in the "Neues Museum" in Berlin and it really is a masterpiece. It dates from the acme of Egyptian civilization and is comparable to masterpieces of the European humanistic age. However, we must not forget that, in ancient Egypt, at the time when Thutmose was working on his sculpture, slavery was considered normal. In the same way, ten centuries later, Aristotle published his *Politics* containing the well-known definitions of the human being and the slave already quoted. In the same age Polykleitos sculpted his *Doryphoros*, whose body proportions became canonical not only within Greek civilization, but also during the Renaissance. If we

---

[14]   Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253b, transl. E. Barker, Oxford 1946, p. 10.

compare the Egyptian and the Greek peoples, from the humanistic point of view, we can recognise progress as regards the acknowledgement of human uniqueness, although this is not applied to all men/women. Later, anthropocentrism promotes human dignity but slavery was still practiced in the modern era, and even unfortunately continues nowadays. Posthumanist tendencies claim that it is necessary to abandon the humanistic point of view in order to allow men and women to improve themselves through a more natural (Marchesini) or a more artificial (Haraway) way of life. I disagree: the challenge is to embrace not the posthumanist, but the neohumanistic attitude. What does this mean? I think it is:

(a) to keep alive the recognition of humanity's central position in the world;
(b) to progressively explore this, and
(c) to act consequently.

There are two basic reasons in favour of this choice: one ethical-political, the other pedagogical-cultural. I will explore the issue further.

From an ethical point of view, humanism considers the original identity of human beings as radically different from other living creatures, because they are "good in themselves," as indicated by the word "person."[15] This is why it is our duty to take care of each human being "fraternally" as is proclaimed by the first article of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." The reason for this is well expressed at the beginning of the Preamble: "[…] recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." The "core idea" is the acknowledgement of human dignity as original and inalienable. There are important political consequences which arise from these statements. If the human being—any human being—is "good," then it is clear why political governmental systems have developed towards co-responsibility, with the participation of all citizens, each

---

[15]   See my text "Il concetto di persona", in: G. Mari, *Educare la persona*, Brescia 2013, pp. 11–52.

with proper own role. We all know that it was a conquest, the idea of universal citizenship. It was the end-point of a long historical road, connected to the rights of justice, equality, and protection for all people. Why should we risk losing all that by refusing to recognise humanistic anthropocentrism? It is a serious question from the political point of view.

There is at least one other issue to be considered. Following on from the acknowledgement of human uniqueness, education as *coltura animi* was born, which means that to take care of humanity has a value in itself because freedom is recognised as peculiar to humanity. It is not by chance that the Greek word to signify "education" is *paideía* which also means "culture." Using that lexical signpost, we can identify the fundamental human task as "self-cultivation," which is also well expressed by the Latin translation, *humanitas*, meaning "what corresponds to human originality." In fact, usually the word "education" relates exclusively to human beings, with "farming" used for animals and "training" for both animals and humans. The most apt modern word that shows the humanisation task involved in education is the German *Bildung*, coming from *Bild* (meaning "image"), clearly referring to the biblical doctrine. We can find the same meaning within the word "formation" but in a secular sense, being related to the Latin *forma* which corresponds to the Greek *morphé* meaning "inner metaphysical identity." What does it mean to link education and mankind? What does it mean to interpret education as the moral development of the human being? It means to recognise human uniqueness: the conquest of universal education is also the end-point of a long historical road. For this reason, rejecting humanism means rendering the acknowledgement of the universal human right to education and care uncertain—a regression, as opposed to a progression in culture and civilization.

My last considerations briefly deal with the dangers related to the posthumanist point of view: these should not be underestimated. For example, I think it is wrong to speak about the "rights of animals" and the "rights of the earth" because it involves not only anthropomorphizing both animals and the natural environment but also regressing by centuries. In truth, the hard historical path, that led to the recognition of human dignity, started from the anthropomorphization both of animals and of the earth. Only over time did

human self-consciousness grow to recognise mankind's true identity by marking out the difference between mankind and animals: it is not so much that animals and the earth have rights, but that the human being has duties toward them.

Finally, I want to underline the strong convergence between Christian and secular culture in the acknowledgement of human dignity. In fact, both Thomas Aquinas (the *Doctor communis* within Catholic theology) and Immanuel Kant (the most important representative of modern thinkers) are in accord over the statement related to the human being as an "end" and not as a "means"—for this reason, having a "value" in him/herself. As we know, Kant's "categorical imperative" states that humanity must be treated always as an end and never merely as a means to an end. What is the source of this statement? It is Thomas Aquinas who—centuries before—said that the person is so called because he/she is *per se una*[16], being "an end in him/herself."[17] How could this happen? Because Kant was Baumgarten's disciple and Baumgarten was Wolff's disciple and Wolff was the last German scholastic thinker. The anthropocentric idea of the human being having a value in him/herself, is common to both Catholic and secular culture: it is the essential common ground within today's complexity. This provides us with another reason why we must not abandon the humanistic point of view.

Bibliography

Aristotle, *Politics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1946.

Fukuyama F., *Our Posthumanistic Future*, Profile Books, London 2002.

Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man", XVI, transl. H.A. Wilson, in: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series II, vol. 5, ed. P. Schaff, H. Wace, The Christian Literature Company, Oxford – London 1893, pp. 387–427.

Haraway D., "A Cyborg Manifesto", in: D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York 1991.

Herbrechter S., *Posthumanism*, Bloomsbury, London 2013.

MacCormack P., *Posthuman Ethics*, Ashgate, London 2012.

Marchesini, R., "Alterity and the Non-Human", *Humanimalia* 2010, no. 2, pp. 93–94.

---

[16] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, I, q. 29, a. 4, *resp.*, Bologna. See also: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, p. 356, <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/cache/summa.pdf> (access: 13.12.2016).

[17] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 112, Torino 1975.

Marchesini R., Tonutti S., *Manuale di zooantropologia*, Meltemi, Roma 2007.

Mari G., *Educare la persona*, La Scuola, Brescia 2013.

Miah A., "Posthumanism: A Critical History", in: *Medical Enhancements and Posthumanity*, eds. B. Gordijn, R. Chadwick, Routledge, New York 2007, pp. 71–94.

Nayar P.K., *Posthumanism*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013.

New American Bible Revised Edition, Catholic World Press/World Bible Publishers (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1970), 2011. Available at: <http://www.usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible/index.cfm>.

Nietzsche F., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, transl. A. del Caro, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006.

Posthumanism, ed. N. Badmington, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2000.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Edizioni Studio Domenicano, Bologna. [See also: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/cache/summa.pdf>].

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, Utet, Torino 1975.

Parmenides, *The Fragments of Parmenides*, ed. A.H. Coxon, Parmenides Publishing, Las Vegas – Zurich – Athens 2009.

Pepperell R., *The Posthuman Condition*, Intellect Books, Bristol 2003.

Wolfe C., *What is Posthumanism?*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 2010.

Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, II, 1, in: Xenophon, *Memorabilia. Oeconomicus. Symposium. Apology*, transl. E.C. Marchant, O.J. Todd, ed. J. Henderson, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) – London 2013, pp. 109–113.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE:

Prof. Giuseppe Mari

Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy

giuseppe.mari@unicatt.it