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The political challenges of the posthumous life

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Ontological politics in a disposable world. The new mastery of nature
Luigi Pellizzoni
Ashgate, 2015, 247 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4724-3494-4

Life. A modern invention
Davide Tarizzo
University Minnesota Press, 2017, 248 pp.,
ISBN: 976-0-8166-9162-3

Posthumous Life. Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman
Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook (Eds.)
Columbia University Press, 2017, xxiii + 392 pp.,
ISBN: 978-0234472458

These three books contribute to the debate around the post-human, a topic that finds its roots in philosophical anthropology and its focus on the theorist-philosophical implications of the changes in human nature generated by technology. The debate on the meaning of the post-human that developed in the late 1990s is a useful framework for discussing *Posthumous Life,* as well as Luigi Pellizzoni's and Davide Tarizzo's books. Evidently, the term 'post' implies the concept of 'the human': the idea of human nature is the starting point for any consideration of the post-human. Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook analyse and discuss the conceptions of the post-human, which constitutes the background of all three works, for example, Nick Bostrom's version, according to which post-humanism is

a beneficial extension for humans, and Katherine Hayles's view of the post-human as the dispersion of all the qualities that we once took to be human. Colebrook takes into account, beyond these two dominant conceptions, many other theories which deal with philosophical anthropology in a post-human landscape: Giorgio Agamben's, Gilles Deleuze's and Jacques Derrida's, but also the authors who lay the foundations of the post-human thinking: Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Charles Darwin.

Colebrook shares Hayles's critical approach to 'the human' rooted in the classic Cartesian pattern of a cognition-oriented subject, characterised by mindfulness, connectedness and self-organising dynamism, as described in her former book, *Death of the PostHuman* (2014). In *Posthuman,* Colebrook has brought to light how the concept shares the structure of nihilism: the negation of the privileged position of man in the world gives rise to a fetishisation of the post-human world as a manless world. Therefore, in the post-human thinking we have but a repetition of the idea that the human extends, surpasses and supplements itself, an old form of residual humanism, rather than a valid solution to the post-human problem.

In their quest to inaugurate an anthropology in which humans definitively renounce their privileged position, Weinstein and Colebrook reveal the need to transform post-human into the *posthumous.* This is no easy matter: the authors specify that the theoretical transformation is necessary, yet impossible (p. 6). The difficulty of overcoming the artificial human/post-human dualism is resolved by means of a 'reconfiguration of the forces' from which the question of human nature emerges. This means a 'critical study of life'.

Posthumous Life collects fifteen chapters dealing with the complex, multiple senses of the post-human, enlightening them in play and in tension with one another. The book has four sections, each taking on one location where the question of 'life' is articulated. 'Posthuman Vestiges' illuminates the porous and permeable border between humans and animals in order to criticise the post-humanist theory, which continues to perpetuate a humanist hierarchical opposition between non-human animals and humans. The second and third sections – 'Organic Rites' and 'Inorganic Rites' – focus on the theme of inhuman rites. The former investigates the 'organic others' to avoid the theoretical anthropocentrism in the conceptualisation of animals following in Derrida's footsteps. 'Inorganic Rites' takes up the 'inhuman', namely the inorganic, technological sub- and supra- personal form of a traditional life-conditioned approach.

The book uses a variety of lenses in order to highlight the differences or the absence of differences between 'human' life and other forms of life, even other non-living things, all the while trying to avoid the classical post-human approaches. The discovery of this new terrain of analysis leads to interesting perspectives on political issues, such as the investigation of political physiology beyond subjectivity (Protevi, p. 211) or the idea of personhood explored in relation to political subjectivity, as exposed in its performative power and use in relation to animals

(Hunt, p. 179). Other essays deal with classical philosophers who gave new impetus to the development of research around subject and subjectivity, such as Judith Butler (Hekman, pp. 65–83) or Derrida (Lippit, pp. 87–104; Nealon, pp. 105–135). By highlighting the question of 'the human' from the point of view of the deconstruction of the 'subject', the posthumous approach opens a new perspective on subjecthood. The inclusion of a whole range of other dimensions to the subject illuminates the interweaving of the human and the non-human and produces a more inclusive ontology. The human becomes, in the posthumous perspective, just an interface and interconnected being, a combination of networks and living systems that comprise a single world of computers, digital media, animals and things.

Weinstein and Colebrook's solution to the 'current state of disturbance' of the human succeeds in overcoming humanism completely and conceptualising life beyond the human (and even beyond 'this earth'). However, the authors remain within the humanistic conception, which sees the human as always defining itself dynamically and dialectically in contrast with nature. The opposition human–nature and the dominant character of the human are linked with a humanistic anthropology that overlooks the former trinitarian anthropology, which identifies a substantial link between human and nature, both opposed to transcendence.

Nonetheless, as demonstrated by *Posthumous Life*, the terrain for clarifying what post-human, posthumous and transhuman are, is that of life. The challenge of a 'posthumous' interpretation of 'human' has brought into question 'life' – understood as the last vestige of humanism. Tarizzo's book, published in 2010 in Italy and now translated into English, deals precisely with this topic.

Tarizzo shows how the idea of 'life' – which embraces the variety of 'the living', thus making 'human' an indistinct part of it – is a 'recent invention'. The author intends to unveil 'the invisible ontology' behind the generally accepted concept of 'life'. According to Tarizzo, the concept of 'life' stems from the theoretical elaboration of 'autonomy' as linked to the advent of modernity. Despite its date of birth – which is not identical with the Cartesian moment, so important for Weinstein and Colebrook – Tarizzo finds the premises of the Kantian idea of autonomy in Augustinian anthropology and its break with classical philosophy that leads to the idea of will. Will puts humans in a vertical relation to God. He writes: 'Humans can choose along will's vertical axis, that is the axis of their individuality … The more one rises, the more voluntas, i.e. one's individuality, is strengthened, is consolidated, furthering the supreme and sovereign will of God, in which the human will is reflected' (p. 18). Given this theoretical assumption, the first to theorise autonomy was Immanuel Kant via the noumenal man, defined as 'pure will', separate from the phenomenal man, who has a concrete existence and a specific will, and who is inevitably contaminated by desire.

Because of this separation, philosophical anthropology is 'split' between universal subjectivity and different forms of subjectivity, namely concrete subjects. The contrast between a concrete man and his humanity ensues: this is the 'theorem

of modernity' (p. 48). The two separate spheres are not, according to Tarizzo, unrelated: the idea of humanity is 'unreachable' because it is based on autonomy, which reveals itself as void of content. The idea of autonomy forms the theoretical premise we need to underpin the category of life.

The central chapter of the volume is entirely dedicated to the complex problem of 'life' as a category, explored by German philosophers such as Gottlob Fichte, G.W.F. Hegel and Friedrich von Schelling. Schelling has a more radical view of the distinction between an autonomous life and different forms of life. He considers 'life' as completely undetermined, as an 'original being' or 'living foundation'. Extrapolated from the concrete forms of living, life is an empty will of life, an empty will of oneself (p. 90), similar to autonomous pure will. At the same time, a very similar concept of 'life' is progressively spreading in the naturalistic thought of the eighteenth century, culminating in Darwin's idea of 'natural selection'.

'Life' acquires the same characteristics as its metaphysical form: as freedom of the autonomous will, it is absolute and empty and 'becomes a white flag, devoid of any sign' (p. 193); life 'comes to offer protection and orientation to our freedom "from", giving it the (ineffable) semblance of that strange freedom "to", that is the freedom to Live' (p. 194). Life replaces freedom, assuming its unlimited and empty structure (the life that wants itself). Thus the philosophical discourse on anthropology transmigrates definitively 'in the Biology Departments'. (p. 50).

The political result of this displacement is 'biopolitics', whose tragic emblem are the Nazi extermination camps. Tarizzo illustrates the relation between National Socialism and Darwin's philosophy, in particular concerning the category of 'life' that the Nazi ideology saturates and distorts. He also highlights the most recent theories inspired by Darwin's categories, namely those of Daniel Dennett and Georges Canguilhem, who manage to escape the metaphysical mortgage of pure will. Dennett affirms the superiority of cultures which show more 'plasticity', in other words the (Western) culture of autonomy in its most up-to-date and powerful form. Canguilhem's thought is analysed in relation to the concept of health as a 'dynamic expression of life' that leads to the coincidence of health and freedom, constructing a new categorical imperative, an 'unconditional', that deprives man of his humanity. Analysing the major Italian theorists who have dealt with biopolitics, Tarizzo highlights Agamben's legal interpretation (homo sacer) and Roberto Esposito's political interpretation. Neither captures the metaphysics hidden in the category of 'life'. For Tarizzo, the reconstruction of the 'hidden' metaphysical premises that shape 'life' is a strategy for 'getting out of modernity': the critical analysis helps liberate us from the contradictions of 'life'.

Pellizzoni's book provides a political interpretation of the 'ontological turn', while discussing many issues covered by the authors of the two volumes analysed above. In particular, he focuses on the crisis in anthropology – 'is there any such a thing as the human?' – trying to evaluate the political significance of the

interconnectedness of the human and the non-human, which is exactly what the studies contained in *Posthumous Life* consider to be a positive effect.

The starting point is the 'ontological turn' in social theory, limited to a particular object: the idea of nature. The analysis begins with very concrete questions about the characteristics of and limits to human intervention in the biophysical world, emerging from debates about carbon markets, geo-engineering, biotechnologies and human enhancement. Pellizzoni points out that, compared to its traditional understanding, 'the mastery of nature' now refers to a subtler strategy of domination. From the beginning, Pellizzoni investigates the theoretical background of the 'new mastery' and embarks on a detailed analysis of the 'ontological turn', which also includes the idea of human nature.

In a basic sense, the 'ontological turn' refers to the broad reaction to the 'post-modern' approach in the social sciences and philosophy. The most significant feature here is the opposition to the linguistic interpretation of reality, which views it as a social construct mediated by culture and language, providing different and equally effective representations of the world. Opposition to cultural constructivism does not mean that the 'ontological turn' leads to a 'realist' position, according to which social research must analyse reality, adopting methodological approaches from the so-called 'hard' sciences. Although 'realism' and 'constructivism' appear to be two very different approaches, Pellizzoni emphasises a common fundamental quality: both are grounded in a binary logic that keeps separate the knowing subject and the known reality, i.e. subject–object, culture–nature, agent–structure, mind–body, organic–inorganic, animate–inanimate, reality–representation, epistemic–ontological. Pellizzoni highlights the fact that the traditional meaning of the 'mastery of nature' depends on a dualistic logic: domination exists between an active subject and a passive object, for example, domination of mind over body, of culture over nature and so on.

The 'ontological turn', then, distances itself from such dualisms and criticises the implied principle of domination. The rejection of the traditional binary logic entails a new, positive understanding of indeterminacy as underpinning an increasing interaction – or blurring – of the human and the non-human, the real and the virtual, the natural and the artificial. Does this also lead to overcoming domination? Or, said differently: what are the political consequences of the 'ontological turn'? This is the question that the book raises.

Among the many scholars engaged in the ontological turn, Pellizzoni carefully and interestingly addresses four strands and individual perspectives. The first is Neil Smith's and David Harvey's Marxism; the second is feminist new materialism; the third is actor network theory, especially Bruno Latour's recent contribution; the fourth is Paolo Virno's philosophy of the human. Certainly, Pellizzoni's choices are not random, although the grounds for the choices are not made explicit. I think the reason is that all these theories share a common opposition to the domination idea, both in relation to nature and in relation to

human (nature). All of them claim, indeed, that emancipation and liberation from domination is grounded precisely on a non-dualist ontological perspective. Pellizzoni's aim is to demonstrate that the political results of the ontological turn may not be emancipation and liberation, but a new form of domination: a 'new mastery of nature'.

Let us consider how Pellizzoni argues for his thesis via his analysis of feminist new materialism. Central to his treatment is Karen Barad's work, which, drawing on both poststructuralism and Niels Bohr's physics, accounts for materiality as a constant flux and contingent presence – what Derrida calls 'a matter without presence and substance' (p. 97). The lack of a distinction between world and thought, subject and phenomenon (Barad defines phenomena as 'ontologically primitive relations' (p. 98) where the components intra-act) leads to the disappearance of the agent. The agent becomes part of the phenomenon. Similarly, for Colebrook, 'matter is differential, rather than substantive' (p. 99). Thus, similarly to the new Marxist view, feminist new materialism also eliminates the difference between human and nature. According to Pellizzoni, the outcome is a new version of vitalism, which 'represent(s) the epitome of the ontological turn' (p. 101).

The post-humanist standpoint thus fails precisely in its claim of emancipation and liberation. New materialism transfers the emancipatory potential to matter and leads to a post-humanist perspective based on the idea that domination depends on a 'centred notion of subject' and that its overcoming will have an emancipatory effect. Pellizzoni points out, however, that this outlook comes dangerously close to the neoliberal understanding of subjectivity, where the dominated subject (allegedly) no longer exists. 'The neo-liberal agent finds in having no substantive core or stable centre the opportunity for an endless selfreshaping and expansion, through a proprietary interaction with a surrounding environment understood as equally fluid and indeterminate' (p. 104). Latour's actor–network theory also yields results quite compatible with this.

Following thus analysis, Pellizzoni raises the fundamental question: What are the political consequences of the 'ontological turn'? What are the results of 'ontological politics'? For him, the answer is clear: the lack of natural limits and the negation of any residual externality of nature pave the way to an unprecedented dominative thrust, which cutting-edge social theory is ill-equipped to detect and address. Here resides the most important point of Pellizzoni's analysis. Indeed, he operates with concepts drawn from Carl Schmitt's political theory, and specifically the relationship between the metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges – in this case, the interconnection of nature and society – and the form of its political organisation (Schmitt 2005). The disappearance of a clear distinction between the social and the natural is the metaphysical expression of the neo-capitalist order.

A crucial outcome of 'ontological politics', then, is that it undermines the critical capacity inherent in a normative definition of human nature. On this point,

however, Pellizzoni leaves Schmitt's perspective behind and takes a more philosophical route. The need to recover the distinction that separates the human from the non-human, without falling onto the old dualistic scheme of the mastery of nature, leads Pellizzoni to turn to philosophical anthropology, and more precisely to Heidegger's interpretation of technique and nature. According to Pellizzoni, Martin Heidegger's description of technology depicts 'with amazing accuracy the new mastery of nature…. and the ambivalence of postconstructionist accounts of human agency' (p. 154). Pellizzoni recovers from Heidegger's anthropology the idea that the human being is distinct from, yet not superior to, the animal: the 'thrown' condition of human existence, its opening to a concealment, differentiates the human being from other forms of life, without giving the former a dominant position – thanks to the critique of every metaphysical foundation. On this basis Pellizzoni seeks to lay the foundations of 'critical humanism', which he opposes to the 'metaphysical underpinning of current anti- or post-humanism' (p. 164). What Pellizzoni does not seem to consider, however, is the independence of history and the event character of the being-in-the-world, namely the ambiguity of the Heideggerian anthropology. Indeed, Heidegger's anthropology opens itself up to being filled with political accounts that can also deny human nature, which leads to a willingness to adapt and accept any political circumstance (such as NSDAP) (Löwith, 1984).

The second step in the philosophical path of the book is linked to epistemology and in particular Theodor Adorno's critical theory. The theoretical merit of critical theory is that the world can be thought using concepts not in a dominative manner but rather conscious of the fact that they are set in contingent, always revisable, constellations. The theoretical force of negativity is a common feature of Heidegger and Adorno (p. 190).

Close to Heiddegger's and Adorno's critical theory, Agamben's thought outlines, for Pellizzoni, how it might be possible to act without being caught by the logic of neoliberal capitalism and thus respond to the question of 'what to do here and now' (p. 221). This question is central to the whole book: 'Is the value of a theoretical elaboration proportional to its ability to disclose concrete alternatives?' (p. 221). Agamben's philosophy reveals new theoretical and practical perspectives, especially through the development of the notion of 'impotentiality'. To sum up, given his complex analysis of Agamben's critique of modern ontology and its Christian theological roots, Pellizzoni stresses that 'impotentiality' may trigger the deactivation of the neoliberal approach to the world and subjectivity. The Franciscan form of life, the expression of 'impotentiality' where rule and life are inseparable, is the paradigm of another 'form of life'. The care of the self, necessary to achieve a state of perfection, is not 'self-mastery' in a dominative sense, (p. 216) but rather in the sense of indistinction and fusion, key to overcoming ('deactivating') the neoliberal paradigm of operativity (p. 217).

That Agamben's critical approach can outline a way out of the unwitting alliance of the ontological turn with current capitalist domination is, however, doubtful: Franciscan indistinctness and fusion of life and rule is, indeed, the result of the 'imitation of Jesus'. It is not a 'critical humanism': Christ is the core of an anthropology rooted in faith and love, the only anthropology fit to develop a clear distinction from nature (Arendt, 2002).

The reference to Christian anthropology can be useful to start thinking of man not as a subject and not even as a will. Indeed, Augustin refuses explicitly the idea of self as a subject and points out the experience of love that exceeds and oversteps it: love and knowledge are not in the mind 'ut in subjectum' (De Libera, 2015). Pellizzoni's and Tarizzo's books deal with the Christian roots of humanistic subject without considering Augustine's critical point of view. However, the trinitarian self who loves, wills and knows could offer a wider perspective for thinking the human beyond the dominant humanistic subject, thus giving a new meaning to Weinstein and Colebrook's *Posthumous Life*. Pre-humanistic anthropology, still not sufficiently engaged with, can give important stimuli to rethinking the human after humanism.

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