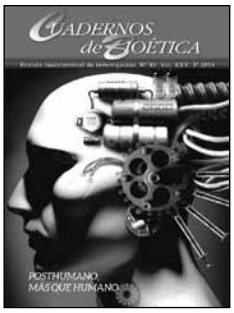
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Does Post-Humanism Still Need Ethics? [¿Necesita el posthumanismo la ética?]

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Item Type	Article
Authors	Murillo Gómez, José Ignacio
Publisher	Asociación Española de Bioética y Ética Médica
Rights	Creative Commons Copyright (CC 2.5)
Download date	2026-11-06 16:20:02
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/153863



DOES POST-HUMANISM STILL NEED ETHICS? THE NORMATIVITY OF AN OPEN NATURE

¿NECESITA EL POSTHUMANISMO LA ÉTICA? LA NORMATIVIDAD DE UNA NATURALEZA ABIERTA

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ABSTRACT:

Keywords:
Post-humanism, transhumanism, nature, power, emancipation.

In the current era, post-humanism usually adopts two forms. One of these is related to postmodern thought and its critique of Enlightenment ideals, while the other, which is usually referred to as 'transhumanism', declares itself the heir to optimistic belief in the technological progress of modernity. Nevertheless, both seem like new versions of the struggle between an individualist version of liberalism and its critics. In so far as they are ethical proposals, we may hold them to account for the vagueness of their moral objectives, which only seem to advocate –each in its own way– emancipation and the removal of barriers that may impede an increase in power. This defect is not, though, independent of their rejection of the notion of nature. By contrast, classical ethics does not focus so much on power or emancipation as on the nature of human telos and of his true growth, and it is only from this standpoint that it concerns itself with the means by which this can be achieved.

RESUMEN:

Palabras clave:
Posthumanismo, transhumanismo, naturaleza, poder, emancipación.

Recibido: 18/10/2013
Aceptado: 23/06/2014

El posthumanismo de nuestra época suele adoptar dos formas. Una de ellas se encuentra emparentada con el pensamiento posmoderno y con su crítica de los ideales ilustrados, mientras que la otra, que se suele denominar transhumanismo, se declara heredera del optimismo en el progreso tecnológico de la modernidad. Ambas aparecen como dos nuevas formas de la pugna entre una versión individualista del liberalismo individualista y sus críticos. En cuanto propuestas éticas, cabe achacarles la vaguedad de los objetivos que proponen, pues su propuesta moral parece reducirse a propugnar, cada uno a su modo, la emancipación y eliminar las barreras que pueden dificultar el incremento del poder para los seres humanos. Pero este defecto no es independiente de su rechazo de la noción de naturaleza. Frente a ellos, la ética clásica no se centra tanto en el poder o en la emancipación como en la naturaleza del fin y del verdadero crecimiento humano, y solo desde ahí se preocupa por los medios para alcanzarlo.

"Sapientis est non curare de nominibus". This aphorism urges us not to dwell on words, however evocative, but to seek their real meanings. Words such as post-humanism or transhumanism are quite often used to refer to ambitious political and cultural projects. Here I understand post-humanism to mean the cultural move-

ment which proposes the 'end of man', declaring a gap between us and our descendants. However, there are different ways of conceiving the post-human future. For some it will emerge only through abandoning the category 'humanity' as the key to our self-understanding, through the adoption of a resolute critical attitude. For others, post-humanism is a state that will be reached when techno-scientific progress definitively places our fate in our own hands, so that we can completely control our futures. Those who call themselves 'transhumanists' fall into the latter group.

I believe I am not mistaken when I consider these names as attempts to provoke. Both terms play with the suggestion that what is human, that by which we define ourselves and which is often the argument used to justify many of our convictions, is not only doomed to disappear, but that we are obliged to abandon it. This would doubtless be an extraordinary revolution, which even poses questions about our individual and collective identity. Would I remain myself if I become something different from human? To what extent does humanity belong to the content of what I am? Will it still be something common between us and our descendants after this drastic change?

Provocation can be healthy when it compels us to reassess what we take for granted and never question, which might be at the very root of our problems. However, the danger with names that convey 'too much' is that they often conceal more than they reveal. So, before we analyse the content of what the post-humanists understand by 'humanity' and the possibility of overcoming it, it is difficult to declare oneself in favour of or opposed to what they offer. If we simply confine ourselves to the name, we are not yet in a position to decide whether this is a revolutionary project of incalculable proportions or merely an aesthetic proposal, simply a new way of naming something we have no choice but to accept as inevitable. And our appraisal of it will depend on how much we value that which we are told we leave behind or wish to deliberately surpass.

In this sense, it is curious to observe how our projects seem to shrink, precisely when we have more resources to undertake greater ventures at our disposal – both individual and collective – than in any other period in history. It is as if the drive that gave rise to numerous cultural and technological achievements, such as the supply of resources, improvements in health, better education and access to technology, to cite just a few examples, has lost steam just when we are on the point of having the means to attain the objectives that fuelled such past achievements.

The very progress we have created seems to have undermined the premises on which it was founded and now we find that we are not so sure of the way ahead. Technology is no longer universally viewed as the solution for every problem. It is also seen as a source of risks, and the ends it should serve perceived to be difficult to determine. We have become too critical to accept, collectively and even individually, aims that are worth marshalling our energies and joining forces to achieve. This explains the dominant idea we have of ourselves: that of being adrift, at the mercy of the effects of our own actions and the consequences of our efforts.

Faced by this situation, the evocative power of these proposals, formulated to appear a new revolution, seems to be mobilising some people to break with conformism, inspired by the prospect of a huge enterprise that seems to expand an insipid, limited horizon. In this way, they can mitigate the disenchantment that appears to dominate our era and culture.

In this context post-humanism and transhumanism seem, to be two ways of taking the reins of history. What is their objective? This is the question we need to look at if we want to evaluate these proposals. But in order to formulate the question, it would be useful to describe both where they have emerged from and their historical and intellectual roots.

The most famous post-humanist of the 19th century is, undoubtedly, Friedrich Nietzsche. To Nietzsche man is a problematic being, poised halfway between the animal and a new creature which has not yet come into being, which he calls the superman. This non-conformist approach reflects his criticism of modernity and the European Enlightenment, which put the idea of Humanity

at the centre of everything, and that tried to reaffirm mankind even at the expense of displacing and denying God. But it fell short and only went halfway along the road. If God does not exist, man is exposed as an unstable being. Values appear to be without foundation and a new kind of existence capable of producing them is required. If modernity was motivated by the desire to dominate the world in order to place it at the service of man, Nietzsche, by contrast, proposes to end this mirage and show that only power deserves to serve as a goal for the will. But this vital programme goes beyond what we call human life: it is the vital space of the superman (Übermensch).

In its various versions, 20th century post-humanism returned time and again to Nietzschean sources. One of the versions that has given it a deeper and more metaphysical stamp is the Heideggerian critique of humanism[1]. But we also find other authors like Foucault and Derrida, who, in the final third of the 20th century, made the term 'postmodernism' fashionable, creating a cultural atmosphere in which 'man' is presented as an 18th century invention, a category that conceals an interpretation of reality that is no longer sustainable and, in any case, dangerous.

Curiously, this critical discourse against the categories of the past combines with one of the most tenacious elements of modernity: the desire for emancipation, the formation of a discourse designed to deconstruct all categories that might be an obstacle to freedom, taken here to mean the possibility of choice. Among these categories, the idea of man itself, which has been burdened with various connotations, can be unmasked as a limitation or a disguise for domination. Much of what we might call post-humanism is the result of this incessant criticism of all exclusive categorization, which dominates many areas of cultural and gender studies. If we add to this attitude the awareness of the power of technology over human beings, it is hardly surprising that the idea of man emerges as a remnant of the past which is doomed to disappear. Biotechnological manipulation, man-machine hybridization and the new technologies that facilitate interaction with the world and other individuals have made it possible to transform the world and its inhabitants[2].

Alongside the discourse which declares the obsolescence of the human, there is another current of thought with a very different inspiration, which has given rise to transhumanist discourse. Whereas the former retains some distrust in the face of the scientific and technological rationality which became generalized after the two world wars in continental Europe, the latter has become a bastion of unlimited confidence in such rationality, and seems to have remained intact in some cultural spheres, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. From this perspective, technology poses no threat to freedom. It is the ultimate resource for liberation[3]. This is why one of the first stages of the technological project requires abandoning our reservations about it and accepting it as the most effective means for improving human nature.

Transhumanist discourse presents itself as a liberating utopia, but, through its development, it shows itself to be an attempt to improve human nature in an unlimited fashion by means of technology. While the post-humanism we referred to above is a cultural critique that responds to the totalizing pretensions of certain concepts, transhumanism, as a cultural and ideological venture, serves to orientate and prepare the ground for a project that is essentially technological. The premise that gives it meaning is the thesis that technology is not only the means *par excellence* for attaining our objectives but also the most effective procedure to indefinitely improve the condition of the individual. In other words, we must place all our hopes of salvation in technology.

Transhumanism presents itself as an ethical proposal. It is, of course, in the sense that it offers criteria for judging many of the moral problems society faces. Based

1 See, for example, Heidegger's *Letter on "Humanism"*.

2 Within this perspective, some of its forms are in favour of not definitively losing what is human but rather, setting it in the post-human context. See Botz-Bornstein, Th. «Critical Posthumanism». *Pensamiento y Cultura* 15-1, junio de 2012.

3 "We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering and our confinement to planet Earth", [On line publication] «Transhumanist Declaration» <http://humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-declaration/> [consulted: 17/10/2013].

on these criteria, its judgements usually tend to favour techno-scientific intervention. Thus, for example, not only should the use of drugs or implants to improve human capabilities be permitted, but their development should be proposed as a way of ensuring an improvement in the life and capabilities of individuals. Not only should assisted reproduction techniques and genetic manipulation of our descendants be permitted, but we should use these techniques to direct the course of evolution intelligently[4].

Its *nom de guerre* seems designed precisely to conjure up the objection with which it is most often confronted: is this not a way of erasing or destroying human nature? By calling themselves 'transhumanists' it appears they want to say: "not only are we not afraid of this proposition but we have actually set ourselves the task of creating something better than the human being". They want to convince us that, at last, we have the means to improve what we are and increase our capabilities beyond what they maintain is the haphazard and shoddy process by which we have been generated. In sum, blind destiny engendered us and it is now time for our reason and freedom to take over from where it has left us.

Transhumanism is also an ethical proposal, because it is not just a matter of succumbing uncritically to the 'technological imperative', whereby everything that can be done through technology should be done. On the contrary, it proposes to direct technology in a more appropriate way. The idea is not to place individuals at the mercy of technology but rather to place technology in the service of individuals. This implies carefully assessing the best uses that can be made of technology in order to ensure the greatest good for everybody and the conservation of their dignity.

The cultural niche in which this current of thought is generated explains the tone it adopts. Transhumanists do not present their proposal as a project of global social engineering but as an enhancement of possibilities, and whether people make the most of these opportunities or not will be up to each individual. As in post-humanism, freedom is a core value, although the two schools of thought differ in their understanding of freedom. Whereas post-humanism promotes freedom as emancipation, transhumanism aims to promote freedom of choice – in other words, to increase the possibilities from which we can choose. In the latter case we are dealing with a freedom that affects what each person wants to do with their life, and also what he wants to do with 'what is his', which, let us not forget, also includes his potential descendants.

The application of the transhumanist project, they assure us, would lead to greater diversity in future generations. There will be individuals generated without control and others who have been rigorously selected according to the most advanced criteria available, in order to meet the expectations of whoever commissions them. Among these expectations, it is envisaged that the changes designed to improve what already exists might eventually produce a change in species[5]. But this is not a problem for transhumanists, who firmly believe in the increasing capacity of humanity to accept and tolerate difference. In the same way that Western societies have gradually learnt to coexist within their borders with individuals of other races, with other tastes and behaviours, transhumanists are certain that it will be possible to progressively accept the consequences of greater diversity. This is yet another demonstration of the character nature of their thought. Like some libertarians they seem comfortable about social inequality and they promote it as a source of enrichment, settling for the existence of legal equality – in other words, an absence of privileges in the eye of the law.

With regard to this point, transhumanism distances itself from other forms of post-humanism, whose adherents insist that freedom requires equality, because

4 See Bostrom, N., Sandberg, A. «The Wisdom of Nature: An Evolutionary Heuristic for Human Enhancement». In: Savulescu, J., Bostrom, N. *Human Enhancement*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, 375-416.

5 Although this assumption, implicit in the term 'transhumanism', is in itself already problematic, because the concept of species and the criteria that define it are not uniform or uncontroversial (not even, for some people, the utility of resorting to them) in some contexts. Added to this is the difficulty of defining what we mean by the human species and whether it is just another animal species or not.

without such equality the strongest will end up imposing themselves upon the weakest. This explains the tendency to attribute the role of neutralizing the differences and equalizing individuals to the State, through education and the centralized distribution of resources. Evidently, this version of postmodern post-humanism is rooted in the ideological left wing, inspired by Marx among others. It differs from traditional Marxism in its conviction that the root of oppression is to be found first and foremost in culture and not in the economy. Yet when it confronts the same themes as transhumanism, its interest in equality usually manifests itself as a criticism of any attempt to base differences on biology or some other element that is prior to or inaccessible to culture. One of the strategies it employs to discredit anyone who tries to show these differences from the scientific perspective is to disparage science and its desire for truth and universality, basing its arguments on the ignorance shown by scientists of the cultural and social conditioning factors that affect scientific activity.

In sum, then, postmodern post-humanism and transhumanism share certain features and differ in others. Those shared include their conviction that the human is not a suitable normative concept to guide actions, and that it can and even must be superseded. This makes humans open to the changes that science and technology can bring. However, each of them reacts to these changes in a different way. Whereas postmodern post-humanism celebrates the dissolution of the limits and categories that restrict freedom, transhumanism is enthusiastic about the possibilities technology offers to improve performance and with it, satisfaction.

Those who maintain that modernity has definitively been surpassed should be concerned by the fact that both positions look like two new incarnations of the modern dispute between liberal individualism and its critiques. This dependence on modern categories is also seen in their ontologies and epistemologies. Transhumanism holds that reality is only reached through the methods of empirical science, so it accepts the strict human division between facts and values[6]. Its ontology, according to which only the individual is real, is nominalist and it holds that consciousness and autonomy are the central characteristics of a person and his freedom. Consequently, the society transhumanists propose resembles a huge market in which no limits should be imposed, which must grow and offer more and more possibilities. In turn, postmodern post-humanism criticizes the scientific method using tools inspired by critiques of liberalism, whose proponents range from Hegel to Marx, Nietzsche or Foucault. Their epistemology could be described as idealist in tone, and the society they propose is inclusive and egalitarian, as well as inclined to justify the intervention of authority in order to promote the emancipation of individuals.

However, having reached this point, we need to ask ourselves again about the real content of these proposals. What does post-humanism in its various forms really offer us? Do we really know what we are choosing when we pronounce ourselves in favour of one or other proposition? To some extent, we can say that we do, yet we also need to admit that it is not difficult to give in to the benevolence of some of the values they propose. In the case of post-humanism, it is easy to accept that it is positive to liberate individuals from cultural discourses and categories known to be sources of oppression, and it is also true that a useful tool for doing this is the criticism of culture. In the case of transhumanism, it is difficult to deny the ideal of improving the condition of individuals by means of technology. In the case of both proposals, why limit our possibilities of emancipation and choice on the basis of limiting principles like those of traditional humanism? Why take as a rule of thumb an idea of man to which neither science nor culture can attribute a normative or definitive value? If freedom is to be in our own hands, this must extend beyond what we produce and include the configuration and reconfiguration of what we are.

There is something that does not quite convince. It seems that where there is freedom there is ethics. Of course, this means that if I am free, I am responsible for what I do, and also that in order to act I must have

6 See Hume David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Section I, Part I, Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964, 245-246.

a clear concept of the outcome, which will enable me to judge my actions in accordance with the ultimate objective that I pursue in undertaking them. Thus, it is in this sense that the content of both proposals seems unsatisfactory. Both of them focus on the means, on liberation, yet they offer us very little in terms of how to evaluate outcomes.

To take the transhumanist case; we are aware that science and technology are capable of increasing our possibilities and improving our quality of life. Consequently, transhumanists argue, we must not set limits on any technology that enables us to improve ourselves or the human species. However, the same concept of improvement contains a lethal virus for the infinite openness proposed by this view. It may be summed up by the question: how do we define 'improvement'?

It could be claimed that an improvement is only such if it is in accordance with our wishes, although this offers us little guidance as to what is desirable and what is not. If I want to be taller it is because I think it is better, yet this may be grounded on a vital need should my small stature make living alongside other men difficult on a day-to-day basis, or on a subjective aesthetic criterion that is dictated by fashion. The transhumanist must ensure that all these possibilities are made available to whoever wants to use them, but he does not appear to have a criterion as such for using them. And what if the improvement is not a true improvement or does not satisfy me in the long run?

Transhumanism shares this flaw it shares in the purposive moment with postmodern post-humanism. What turns out to be the most striking thing about the latter is that its constant propensity for being critical of any proposal goes hand in hand with its deliberate resistance to formulating one itself. It is beyond its reach to make a proposal about what is good, about what is the best way of life we can aspire to, or – at least – to offer criteria that enable them to be evaluated. It would see this as a form of imposition which, in turn, it would be necessary to demolish.

This lack of definition about the ideal ends is something these movements have inherited from a large sector of modern thought. Some liberals and libertarians have been reticent about presenting a vision of a good and happy life for each individual with any pretension of universality. According to this tradition, the concept of happiness is merely subjective and in this respect there is no science or rational knowledge of its nature[7]. Whatever the case, this view tends to favour some form of hedonism (a subjectivist way of conceiving happiness), although it does not usually feel obliged to propose a normative hierarchy of pleasure.

However, this lack is even clearer in movements that propose criticism and emancipation. To give a classic example, it is striking that the social action project proposed by Marx concentrates on avoiding the causes of evil and oppression, and not on promoting what he considers to be good. In fact, it is surprising how little space he dedicates to describing the happy life, which, in principle, we will enjoy once we reach the end of the story. In this vision it seems that the assumption is, as in other similar versions, that ethical action must be directed not at promoting what is good, the content of which is ignored or unknown, but rather at avoiding evil, at removing all obstacles that prevent happiness.

Perhaps it is assumed that happiness is spontaneous or automatic or, perhaps that its objective content is not in any way relevant. But this lack of pronouncement about ends has consequences. The first of these is the difficulty encountered when real ethical judgements need to be made. In fact, the obsession with the means and obstacles to happiness obscures the fact that any conception about what such means or obstacles are already implies a pronouncement about the end, but, as in this case, the end is only indirectly proposed, it runs the risk of being unconvincing or, at the very least, uncritical.

7 We find this way of conceiving action in the praxeology of L. von Mises: "Praxeology is indifferent to the ultimate goals of action. Its findings are valid for all kinds of action irrespective of the ends aimed at. It is a science of means, not of ends. It applies the term happiness in a purely formal sense. In the praxeological terminology the proposition: man's unique aim is to attain happiness, is tautological. It does not imply any statement about the state of affairs from which man expects happiness". Von Mises, L. *Human Action. A Treatise on Economics*, Fox & Wilkes, San Francisco, 1996, 15.

Unlike these proposals, traditional ethical systems usually focus on the final objective, on the good, and at the same time, on the means to achieve it. Even Buddhism, a classic example of ethics focused, more than on the pursuit of good, on the struggle against evil, which it equates to pain, proposes an objective and an ideal for life, however vague and difficult to express it may seem. Only by keeping this in mind is it possible to motivate oneself and at the same time, only through this outcome is it possible to evaluate the success or appropriateness of one's own actions. Thus, all ethical systems consider themselves obliged to propose some sort of idea of happiness.

In any case, this flaw affects the transhumanist proposal in particular because it has opted decisively in favour of technological reason which needs to be able to clearly establish its objectives. But in this case, it is precisely the objectives that should mobilize individuals that remain undefined.

This flaw is closely related to the rejection of the notion of nature, a rejection that can be explained by the difficulties modernity has in understanding it. In these proposals, nature is understood to mean a name for what exists or a series of facts that are subject to laws; whatever the case, it is something which is simply 'factual'. The classical notion of nature however, is that which we have to accept in something so that it can be intrinsically capable of improving or worsening. To have a nature is to be a certain way, but it is impossible to be something natural without a specific orientation towards an end. To talk about ends may scandalize some theoreticians of modern science who think that science can only build itself on the negation of the existence of natural ends. Yet we all know we cannot practice zoology without taking into account the difference between a healthy animal and a sick one[8] – a clear natural form of good and bad – and that our dealings with human beings presuppose that we can distinguish, at least in general terms, what objectively benefits and what harms them. In its classical sense, knowing what a natural reality is is inseparable from knowing its orientation to its natural end (*télos*).

Relevant at this juncture is an analogy with artificial beings, which are also defined by their ends. I cannot understand or use a machine unless I know what it is for. This assertion poses no difficulty to modern ontologies, which identify end with purpose and design. Yet what differentiates truly natural beings is that, while the end which gives the machine its reason for being is external to it, that of natural beings – and we can see this particularly clearly in living creatures – corresponds to them intrinsically, and it is the reason for their spontaneity and inner life. They are not a set of parts assembled to achieve a purpose, but rather a being that aspires to its own purpose.

This notion of nature is rejected by post-humanists and transhumanists but, in disposing of it, they make any concrete proposal for improvement vague and imprecise. If man has no nature there is no criterion for deciding what an improvement is and what makes things worse, except in relation to an extrinsic criterion. This criterion could be, as we said above, one's own desire – that is to say, mere personal preferences. Yet even when based on shared intersubjective criteria, we must not forget that these may be configured by the changing parameters of a particular historical period. This is important in the case of changes that are difficult to reverse and especially for those that will affect future generations. Once all objective parameters have been abandoned, the 'principle of beneficence' succumbs to arbitrariness.

Whereas post-humanists tend to make a virtue out of necessity – that is, find the positive side of the process set in motion by the latest technologies – transhumanists embark on a political offensive to promote intervention. From their tenacity we can only conclude that they are sure that giving free rein to all the drastic changes that individuals might choose for themselves, and for future generations, will lead to a better situation. But they have little to say about the world this will create. To understand them, perhaps we ought to turn to their

8 Murillo, J. I. «Health as a norm and principle of intelligibility». In: García, A. N., Silar, M., Torralba, J. M. *Natural Law: Historical, Systematic and Juridical Approaches*, Cambridge Scholar Publishing, Newcastle, 2008, 361-378.

futurist fantasies. In any case, it is clear that the transhumanist is optimistic about the technological future. For him, technical progress can only be accompanied by enhanced well-being and social adhesion, and it is the prejudices that obstruct this that are responsible for poverty and fanaticism. It is true that many of the futurist fantasies of 20th century literature present the dangers that might accompany a society of the future, yet transhumanists are critical of these and reject the fears on which they are based[9]. We are facing a kind of Adamic Enlightenment that appears not to have taken note of the collateral damage that technology has caused, and the risks of its use.

As well as providing a criterion to judge what is or is not best for individuals, the notion of nature refers to something we have in common and that we all share. Sharing the same nature gives us a sense of community and is a guarantee that we can live together. Despite our cultural and individual differences, we can aspire to understand our fellow men from our own desires and experiences. This conviction has been harshly criticized in many areas of the social sciences, especially in favour of culture. The contention that man is a cultural being became for a time the dogma that "what man is is determined by culture".

Cultural relativism claimed there was no room for transcultural value judgements because each culture possesses its own vision of the world. What we consider to be 'natural' depends on each culture. This thesis was upheld with the aim of encouraging tolerance towards that which is different, a tolerance based on the recognition that we are capable of valuing the practices and criteria of people who belong to other groups. But the consequence, perhaps undesired, of this approach is total isolation between cultures. In the transhumanist proposal we encounter an analogous problem. If we forgo the notion of nature, we condemn individuals and generations to isolation. The sense in which we can speak of 'we' is weakened and with it, the possibilities of communication and interaction between individuals.

Furthermore, the notion of nature reminds us that there is an order in improvement. Classical ethical systems clearly distinguish between improving and having more possibilities. The use of a possibility is judged appropriate depending on whether it impedes or enables us to achieve what really improves us[10]. Socrates established the principle that man cannot seek the good without seeking the truth about himself and things. Our reason is not just a capacity mankind has, but what configures all his tendencies, which is precisely why ethics exists.

These are some of the reasons why, in my opinion, we must not do away with the notion of nature in ethics. Of course, this does not mean that the recognition of dignity cannot be attributed to creatures that do not belong to our species. Above all, we need to take note of the fact that the notion of nature in classical anthropology cannot be identified with that of biological species, which does not have a single meaning. The fact that an individual belongs to our species is not the criterion by which we recognize that he or she merits special treatment. To clarify this question, there exists the notion of person which designates individuals whose nature capacitates them for a particular relationship between themselves and others. The conviction that there are beings worthy of moral respect apart from our species existed before the defenders of animal rights came on the scene, although it was based on different reasoning. The clearest example of such a conviction is our relationship with the divine, together with the acceptance of the possibility that other species may exist that share the condition of personal beings with us.

This allusion to the personal condition of individuals of our species poses a difficulty as the person or the self does not identify itself with the nature it has received[11]. This conviction has been developed extensively by Christian thought, which has drawn a clear distinction between the person and his nature in the

9 Bostrom, N. «In Defense of Posthuman Dignity». *Bioethics* 19 (3), (2005), 202-214.

10 See Aristotle, *Politics, 1252.b.1ff.*

11 This subject has been analyzed in depth by contemporary thinkers like R. Spaemann, *Persons: the difference between "Someone" and "Something"*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, and Polo, L. *Antropología Trascendental, tomo I: La persona humana*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 1999.

divine sphere, and in that of creatures. This distinction enables us to see clearly that personal beings transcend their own nature. They do not identify themselves with this nature but rather, it is theirs and they are obliged to adopt an attitude towards it. This attitude is at the very root of ethics.

This possibility of transcendence manifests itself in what we might call 'Christian transhumanism'. In Christianity, the human being is called to be more than human; his calling is to be divine. This is why he has been attributed a supernatural purpose, in other words a purpose that exceeds his capabilities. This purpose is to become God while remaining human. So we can accept, together with nature, the concept of the supernatural as that which enables man to participate in the divine nature. Nature appears, from the perspective of the person, as an inheritance that provides a starting point. This must have a nucleus that is not available to us; otherwise human action would have nowhere to start from and nowhere to go. Of course, this does not mean we cannot intervene or act upon it but that, when we do, we must respect its orientation and the conditions that make it capable of expressing the person.

But this distinction has become a separation in modern thought. This rupture is usually attributed to the Cartesian distinction between consciousness and extension. Whatever the case, it is evident that a way of conceiving man emerges in modernity whereby subjectivity is understood to be emancipated from its bodily condition, such that it emerges as another means, together with others, to achieve our own interests. Man conceives himself as an empty subject that decides freely about his ends. The link between the body and subjectivity reduces the former to a source of hedonistic satisfaction. Indeed, pleasure and pain are indications that there is a minimum of subjectivity in the body that cannot be ignored. However, the subjectivity of the body does extend to the recognition of the ends that it proposes as relevant orientations for the activity of the subject[12].

This disembodiment of man is compatible with materialism. In fact, as Spaemann pointed out, the most extreme subjectivism can coexist with a total objectivation of man[13], for which subjectivity is, from the point of view of understanding human action, totally irrelevant. For example, this action can be explained in terms of the nervous system, which can be seen as nothing other than a causal machine[14] that is not really affected by subjective phenomena. In this scenario, the subject is a sub-product of nervous activity, with some regulatory activity at the service of the mechanisms that generates it, or, perhaps, with no function at all[15]. Whatever the case, its pretensions of control are shown to be a mirage.

Nevertheless, as we always have to contend with subjectivity and our daily life unfolds in accordance with the criteria of *folk-psychology* (we have not yet found other criteria on which to base our day-to-day decisions), the result is that our vision of the reality of what we are (whether we name it man or biological machine) provides no useful criterion as to what to do with our apparent freedom, which is doomed to roam the boring byways of the most profound arbitrariness. If everything has the same value, nothing is worthwhile.

Freedom uprooted from nature can no longer aspire to improve nature. It can only aspire to reconfigure it over and over again, as it pleases. Transhumanism can propose the attainment of greater heights of power and ever greater satisfaction for more people as an objective, yet it is difficult to make judgements about the satisfaction of future generations if we do not even know what their tastes and needs will be.

Moreover, there is something else we need to take into account. The transformative ability man has over nature is limited by his predictive capacity. Science is

12 A critical analysis of this disembodiment is made by N. K. Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010.

13 Sabuy, P. «Entretien avec le professeur Robert Spaemann (Rome, le 22 février 1998)». *Acta Philosophica* 8 (2), (1999), 323-324.

14 See, for example, the interview with Patricia and Paul Churchland in Blackmore, S. *Conversations on Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, 50.

15 The idea that subjectivity is a product of the brain and that it is in some way at its service, is found in recent texts, such as those of Damasio, A. *Self Comes to Mind*: Constructing the Conscious Mind, Vintage Books, New York, 2010 and Metzinger, Th. *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2003.

gradually discovering and attributing more importance to the fact that in many spheres the consequences of an intervention cannot be predicted in the long and midterm. This has always been known in the moral and historical sphere. It is possible, in fact, that saving the life of one man may be the cause of a future tyranny. However, nature is full of unpredictable or emerging phenomena, in which whatever originates by a specific action has unforeseen effects. A world teeming with life is living proof of this. The appearance of new species cannot be subjected to a determinist model and the emergence of new forms of life also implies the appearance of new laws and criteria.

Transhumanists should pay more attention to this observation. Our desires to improve the individuals of our species by changing their biology to make them healthier, more intelligent and better equipped for self-control and social life face the reality that we are incapable of predicting the results of virtually all the changes we can produce in human nature. To modify aggression or increase our height resolves some problems but it also causes others. Thinking about this could lead us to a state of pessimism or a kind of scepticism, in which, given that the results of our actions are unpredictable, it would seem better not to act or change anything. But we ought not to forget that this decision is also a form of action. Transhumanists are right when they say we must make all the means at our disposal available to improve ourselves and our descendants. Yet guidelines for the intelligent intervention of humanity in the future they envisage only make sense if they are based on an attempt to better understand the nature of what we wish to act on.

This implies recognizing certain limits, though these limits are not a renunciation of action. Rather, they are the condition of possibility that ensures our efforts are rationally oriented. One of these limits is the recognition that our responsibility is not universal. Our action should take into account the consequences it leads to, but it cannot take them all into account. If we try, any action is paralyzed. However, this paradox stems from a failure to understand the nature of human action and ethics. The improvement of humanity and the world itself cannot be achieved without order, and this order begins with our own personal improvement.

In classical ethics, which is not obsessed with the production of what is good but rather with the improvement of people and things, the best way an agent has of improving the world is to try to better himself. Yet this is not an option for someone who can be anything. If such a person wants to be benevolent towards others he can only offer the widest range of means and possibilities, without any criterion that indicates how they must be used. In this way, the exaltation of unlimited power leads us to a state of utmost confusion. In these conditions the only alternative left to us is to seek power for its own sake, a form of inebriation which, as classical thinkers saw only too well, produces a craving which can never be satisfied. In this way happiness is indefinitely postponed to the future. This is why the divinization some transhumanists propose is incompatible with the existence of a God who is different to us[16], or, in other words, with the existence of a reality we must respect and an authentic good we can aspire to.

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16 This is how Max More concludes his article More, M. [On line publication] «Transhumanism. Towards a Futurist Philosophy». 1990, 1996 <http://www.maxmore.com/transhum.htm> [Consulted: 10/6/2013]: "No more gods, no more faith, no more timid holding back. Let us blast out of our old forms, our ignorance, our weakness, and our mortality. The future is us".

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