

Perfectibilities, or, How (Not) to Improve Humans

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...humanism is dead, has been so since the late nineteenth century, and it is about time to quit it. Let us bury it with appropriate rites, which means honouring the little that was good, and understanding what went wrong and why. It was a seductive beast and we do not want to fall for its charms a second time. (Carroll 1993: 232)

Il peut nous sembler préférable, à certains égards, de demeurer *bêtement* humains. (Hansen-Løve 2019 : 119, my emphasis)

Positionings

At a purely discursive level or in Foucauldian terms, humanism, posthumanism and transhumanism, comprise everything that is being said about that which their respective –ism describes, consolidates, homogenizes and legitimates, i.e. the human, the posthuman, the transhuman. These, in turn, human, posthuman and transhuman, are figures, metaphors, or, in Derridean terms, transcendental signifiers – governing their respective discourses while always remaining out of their definitive and definitional reach. A critical posthumanism situates itself not outside this discursivity or interdiscursivity – it is thus no “metahumanism” – but as a critical but implicated observer and commentator, aware of the fundamentally political and conflictual nature of social discourses and their materialities, and equally aware of its own implication and positionality – lessons it has learned from cultural studies and, more specifically, cultural anthropology. Something it has learned from postmodernism, on the other hand, is the strange temporality that drives the prefix “post”; there is an ambiguity in the very term post-human-ism. It can “post” or position itself obliquely to either the figure of the “human” or the discourse of “humanism”. This oblique position is the result of the ambiguity contained in the very notion of the post and which conditions the act of “posting”. This is true of any “post” – postmodernism, posthumanism, posthuman, postanthropocentrism...

Trans-, on the other hand, is an entirely different beast. It stands for a move that erases differences by “transcending” or sublimating or indeed repressing them, whether these differences are sexual, linguistic, cultural, spatial, temporal or other.

Perfectibilities

Perfectibilities – in the plural, because there is always more than one. There is more to perfectibility than what the OED writes, namely that it is the “capability of being perfected or brought to a state of perfection; esp. the capacity of humanity to progress towards physical, mental, or moral perfection”, or indeed all three of these. An advocate of or believer in human perfectibility thus understood is called a “perfectibilitarian”, according to the *OED*. In Barbara Cassin’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (2014), Bertrand Binoche contributes an entry on perfectibility and traces its origins and developments across three main national philosophies (French, German and English). Most noteworthy in what Binoche has to say is surely the semantic development that happened to Rousseau’s original term,

namely from an initially quite ambiguous “blessing” to an almost “necessary tendency towards perfection” or “indefinite perfectibility” (769). In other words, from an understanding of human perfectibility as a faculty of self-improvement as a kind of “metafaculty on which development of all other faculties depends”, the notion becomes in the later 18th Century and throughout the Enlightenment something like “the passive faculty of ‘being improved’” (*ibid.*), an almost “cosmological” concept that paints the human as fundamentally educable and in need of enlightened rulers and guidance – an understanding that also chimes well with the Christian morality of emulating divine perfection and the innate human desire of happiness and virtue. Thus, what had been a purely “reactive faculty, now became a spontaneous tendency, a sort of eminently positive instinct that was henceforth constantly opposed to Rousseau” (*ibid.*), a “mute impulse that leads humans to perfection”. Apart from this remoralizing tendency, in 18th Century Protestant England the faculty of self-improvement was combined with the notion of individual freedom to form the kind of “liberal humanism” that arguably still dominates human self-understanding today. The more liberty is given to everything and everyone, this Priestleyan liberalism argues, “the more perfect it will become” (771). This, then, turns into a political argument according to which “human progress is the immanent work of society as opposed to government: the latter has no task other than to provide the conditions” for “ensuring a maximum liberty”. Humans are now perfectible in the sense that by themselves they are “politically authorized and morally obliged to freely examine ideas, they move from truth to truth toward the heavenly Jerusalem” (*ibid.*). From this nascent antagonism between individual liberty and “the withering away of government” to contemporary neoliberal capitalism, liberal democracy and modern humanism including its projected transcendence by transhumanism there is, consequently, a direct line.

What exactly has been “lost” in this process of perfecting perfectibility since Rousseau? This might also be a way of asking what humanism and its transhumanist “perfecting” desire continues to repress. In fact, as Binoche explains elsewhere (2018: 99), Rousseau’s notion is a somewhat paradoxical perfectibility *without* perfection, in that perfectibility is at once a necessary condition of humanity (a faculty that distinguishes humans from other animals), a central faculty that is responsible for radical human potentiality and the greatest source of human unhappiness. In short, perfectibility certainly does not translate easily into perfection. Perfectibility is “blind” so to speak; it in no way points towards any specific goal of perfection. It resists easy teleological or evolutionary interpretations. In fact, Rousseau is rather inclined to argue the reverse, namely that perfectibility in individuals at least most frequently manifests itself in the opposite of perfection, namely in decline. However, only if decline is a reality, can there also be a notion of progression or progress, both at an individual as well as at a species level. One could even say, ironically, that only in regressing can humans perceive their perfectibility. Perfectibility is therefore a mixed blessing.

This is also something Derrida seizes upon in his deconstructive reading of Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* in *Of Grammatology* in which he works through the fact that for Rousseau nature and perfectibility form a “hypothetical point of purity” to which he opposes the “corruptions of humanity: our vain and arrogant quest for more knowledge than we need, our invasive mining of the earth... our vanity, greed, and artificiality”. However, “perversion of nature is inevitable” (Deutscher 2005: 226). Nature is therefore both “opposed to perversion and incorporates pervertibility” (226). In the same way, human perfectibility necessarily draws us out of our original state of

“innocence” and opens the way to vice and error, but without it there can be no virtue or wisdom either:

It would be sad for us to be forced to agree that this distinctive and almost unlimited faculty [i.e. perfectibility] is the source of all man’s misfortunes; that this is what, by dint of time, draws him out of that original condition in which he would pass tranquil and innocent days; that this is what, through centuries of giving rise to his enlightenment and his errors, his vices and his virtues, eventually makes him a tyrant over himself and nature. (Rousseau, 1987: 45, cited in Deutscher 2005: 227)

So, even though perfectibility and the pervertibility of nature are interconnected, it is only because of perfectibility that “we do have the potential for the imagination, memory, reflection, and regulated rationality that allow us to understand ourselves as a perversion of nature’s dictates” (Deutscher 2005: 227). Derrida seems to embrace this aporia when he says that he loves “the process of perfectibility” (Derrida 2001: 100, cited in Deutscher 2005: 227) in the same way that he speaks about a messianism without messiah, or impossible necessity more generally – a contamination at the heart of purity, an impossible but necessary fidelity to the one (one truth, one God, one human). The impossibility of the desire for perfection and progress does not negate, cannot overcome their indetermination, their corruptibility. It only increases their necessity – a necessity that ultimately, however, cannot be trusted. There only ever is, therefore, limited or conditional perfection, or one could say, more mundanely, moments of brilliance. Progress could turn either way, the future is radically unpredictable – this is what actually makes it futural (*avenir* as opposed to *futur*), but in order to let the future arrive, perfectibility and progress remain absolutely necessary, as regulative ideas so to speak, or as perfection-to-come.

The problem with perfection is thus that we don’t know. We don’t know from where the future arrives, we don’t know if it arrives, whether it arrived in the past, in the present or the future. It is not something that can be anticipated. Anticipation definitely stops it from arriving. And nevertheless it is almost inevitable that we should anticipate it. Does one not have to prepare for the future, for the best or the worst to happen? Thus in returning to the question of perfectibility one is forced to tackle two other problems, which I’m going to outline in turn in what follows. One is the question of politics and the future, the other problem takes us back to the idea of humanism and its discontents.

Future perfect: Constructions of the (Human) Future

Let me emphasize that human future and future human are two very different things. This is precisely what posthumanist politics and the politics of the posthuman are about. The figure of the posthuman is evidently contested, otherwise there wouldn’t be events like this one. What the future of the human and its others will or indeed should be like is therefore the key difference between a critical posthumanism and a largely techno-enthusiastic or techno-utopian transhumanism. After a period of anti-utopian and often techno-sceptic sentiment after WWII, especially in those countries that were most affected by widespread destruction and shocked by the ongoing threat of nuclear annihilation, utopianism under posthuman conditions is back in two major forms: one is a return of the question concerning technology that sees in the essence of technology no longer a Heideggerian “challenge” but a “task” – this

is where transhumanism seems to wish to situate itself, namely as an advocate of technological progress even in a time of dwindling (natural) resources. The other form of utopianism one might call eco-utopian in the sense that it seeks alternatives to human hubris, speciesism, or human exceptionalism and tends to be against modern, liberal-humanist techno-progressivism.

The reaction to the gradual realisation of human-induced climate change and the advent of the so-called “Anthropocene” couldn’t be more different depending on which form of utopianism one is willing to embrace. The science fiction film *Interstellar* (2014) might serve as an illustration of how these two positions are unfolding. Science fiction is quite naturally an important battle ground between the two perspectives with their respective future-politics. It is worth noting of course that while SF is an important attempt at anticipating future scenarios, at controlling futures and thus at intervening in the present, it is also a key genre that deliberately blurs fiction and fact – which has also made it a powerful resource for futurological science, hence my use of the term “science faction” as an important characteristic of post- and transhumanist discourse (cf. Herbrechter 2013). In *Interstellar*, the ecologically damaged planet seems to face a stark choice – let’s call it a combination of “degrowth” and “rewild” versus investing in the search for “exoplanets”. A third scenario the film does not engage with but which one should also add to the techno-utopian fantasies is that of geoengineering. Both the colonisation of exoplanets and the geoengineering of planet Earth are reliant on the notion of technological (re)constructibility at a planetary level. Both usually are dismissive of preservationist ideas and a defence of and return to a strong idea of “nature”. Timothy Morton discusses *Interstellar* at length in his *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (2017) in these terms.

Solidarity with contemporary and future humans and nonhuman people is the key ethical aspect of a future politics, the politics of the future or the future as radically contested and political ground between post- and transhumanist visions. Both are in this sense about constructions of the future, i.e. creating some kind of consensus about and thus a legitimisation of the use of limited resources (as well as gathering and retaining “attention” – given the central role of the media in this context and in “information societies” more generally), in times of existential threats, deep uncertainty and increasing ideological polarisation. What Morton calls the “symbiotic real” of an ecological “humankind” – understood both as a generic term but also literally as “kind” humans (Morton 2017: 3) – functions precisely according to the idea of Rousseauist perfectibility that transhumanists would probably want to ignore or resist. Where do you stand with regard to an unreserved ethical responsibility of humans towards fellow humans past, present and future and with regard to a political solidarity with nonhumans – this one might argue is the predicament of “our” time between “the fourth industrial revolution and the sixth mass extinction” as Rosi Braidotti formulates it (2019). And this has everything to do with the role of humanism and anthropology – the last and possibly ultimate grand narrative – the story of the human and its future, and “our” increasing “incredulity” towards its various versions, especially the heroic ones.

Room for improvement, or There Is Always Some

In other words, what is wrong with humanism? And what is wrong with humans? Which humanism and what humans?, one might immediately add. Humanism is based on a protean

or promethean notion of the human, a chameleon who is always becoming something or someone else, whose “essence” is always contested, and who therefore always has to reinvent itself – which makes both the human and its discourse, humanism, ungraspable “as such”. However, there are some recurring motifs, even if, as Tony Davies writes, that humanism is “one of those words, like ‘realism’ or ‘socialism’, whose range of possible uses runs from the pedantically exact to the cosmically vague” (Davies 2008: 3). As a result:

On one side, humanism is saluted as the philosophical champion of human freedom and dignity, standing alone and often outnumbered against the battalions of ignorance, tyranny and superstition... On the other, it has been denounced as an ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society and culture, the marginalisation and oppression of the multitudes of human beings in whose name it pretends to speak, even, through an inexorable ‘dialectic of enlightenment’, for the nightmare of fascism and the atrocity of total war. (Davies 2008: 5)

This means that anthropocentrism, the value and sanctity of human life over everything else, but also a certain investment in the beneficial aspect of culture, cultivation, education or “*Bildung*”, a cherishing of individual freedom and personal development, a striving for perfection or genius, the pursuit of happiness and justice, rather in this life than the “next” – all without any doubt admirable and worthwhile pursuits – are all candidates for or elements of an impossible definition of humanism. As Davies, explains:

The several humanisms – the civic humanism of Confucian sages quattrocento Italian city-states, the Qur’anic humanism of Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, the Protestant humanism of sixteenth-century Northern Europe, the rationalistic humanism that attended at the revolutions of enlightened modernity, and the romantic and positivistic humanisms through which the European bourgeoisies established their hegemony over it, the revolutionary humanism that shook the world and the liberal humanism that sought to tame it, the humanism of the Nazis and the humanism of their victims, the antihumanist humanism of Heidegger and the humanist antihumanism of Foucault and Althusser, the secularist humanism of Huxley and Dawkins or the posthumanism of Gibson and Haraway – are not reducible to one, or even to a single line or pattern... the problem of humanism remains... an inescapable horizon within which all attempts to think about the ways in which human beings have, do, might live together in and on the world are contained. (140-141)

This implies that humanism, given its protean form but also its obvious benevolent intent, is quite unsurpassable. And this is also its problem, the road to hell, as the old saying goes, is paved with good intentions. There is not a crime, as Davies does well to remind us, that has not been committed in the name of humanity (131). The way all humanisms come across “pragmatically” or “politically” is as missionary and imperialist, universalist rather than particularist. Humanism is without doubt necessarily “speciest” in its valuation of humans over everything else even when it acknowledges that there are ethical responsibilities for nonhuman others. However, the fact is that things like “the freedom to speak and write, to organise and campaign in defence of individual or collective interests, to protest and disobey: all these, and the prospect of a world in which they will be secured, can only be articulated in humanist terms” (Davies 2008: 132).

All this notwithstanding, given the specific moment of historical, economic, geological, ecological and radically political uncertainty we find ourselves in today, the grand narrative of liberal humanism with its intrinsic and inevitable self-contradictions and aporias is at a breaking point and a consensus seems to be emerging that it no longer holds the answers to current and future challenges. This leads me back to the main focus of my argument, namely the question of perfectibility, perfection or future enhancement.

Desire of the Posthuman, or Yearning for Perfection

And a yearning or a pious wish it is and remains by most, since there can never be any consensus about what might actually constitute perfection. Except for some, that is, who seem to already have decided that they know which way perfection lies. For a start, are we talking about social, individual, technological or planetary progress, enhancement and perfection? Should humans (and maybe nonhumans, too) be physically or morally enhanced, or both at the same time? And what would that imply as far as the relationship between embodiment and mindfulness is concerned? At what point does “moral” enhancement turn into something like an “immoral” enhancement?

Self-declared transhumanists are often taken to task for their outrageous utilitarianism and also their naïve techno-enthusiasm. However, in a sense, they’re only taking the mainstream humanist notion of perfectibility to its logical conclusion. In the end, we all yearn for some form of improvement if not perfection in humans and elsewhere. It is almost impossible for politicians, teachers, priests, doctors and so on not to believe and act with a notion of moral improvement in mind. The big difference between critical posthumanists – those who believe one should probably go on being human but not necessarily in the humanist sense – and transhumanists – those who are not really positioning themselves against humanism, rather against the idea of human “meekness” or humility – seems to be that the latter are driven by some desire for the posthuman and its achievability. Both can be accused of misanthropy in a sense, only that transhumanists believe the solution lies in supersession (of the species) and some form of “immateriality”, whereas critical posthumanists tend to favour maybe a less drastic, biocentric, sustainable and (new) materialist form of deanthropocentrism.

I think the best argument against a transhumanist notion of perfection or meliorism understood as “enhancement of the human *as human*” (Hauskeller 2013: 2) is the one given by Michael Hauskeller in his *Better Humans: Understanding the Enhancement Project*, namely that there is no standard by which we could possibly measure what it would mean to be a “better human”. Even if it was possible to agree on some collective imaginary state of what “better humans” meant, there would not be any consensus about how to achieve this and whether achieving it was actually that desirable:

The main problem with the project is not that human enhancement is morally wrong, but rather that we lack any clear idea of what it would actually consist in without being aware of the lack. There is no such thing as human enhancement, understood as the enhancement of the human as a human. (Hauskeller, 2013: 185-186)

What is at stake in the transhumanist ideal is, as Nicolas Le Dévédec rightly points out, “the critical and political relationship to the world inherited from the humanist ideal of

perfectibility, which underlies more fundamentally the modern project of democratic autonomy” (Le Dévédec 2018: 501). Even worse, in the current context of neoliberal capitalist biopolitics, dematerialisation can be seen as an attempt at depoliticisation, by submitting perfectibility to utilitarian technological and technocratic decisions as to which way physical and moral enhancement most probably lie. This precisely is what is being contested as the most political feature of future politics. We can only be “unfit for the future” if we are talking about a pre-empted future, a teleological or post-political one. Or, as Hauskeller adds: “Only if we feel that we have been treated unfairly by the world (and possibly its creator) can we believe that we are entitled to posthuman bliss” (2013: 188), which is clearly an age-old Gnostic theme. The “case against perfection” to use Michael J. Sandal’s phrase (Sandal 2007) is not against perfectibility as a necessary principle of human, and also undoubtedly nonhuman, life but lies in its inevitable reductionism, and more specifically in its *depoliticising* reduction of plurality and contingency, or the suppression of the future as radical possibility and unpredictability.

This, as I’ve argued, is because of the concept of perfectibility itself. Even here, there is always more than one, or, it is the necessary and impossible oneness of the idea of perfectibility that already produces the irreducible plurality of perfections.

Could Do Better: Humanism without Humans or Humans without Humanism

What does this mean in political terms? Where does this leave me with my differentiation between critical post- and techno-utopian transhumanism? Keeping the horizon of perfectibility open by resisting and pluralizing the notion of perfection makes it possible to distinguish between different kinds of politics. “Throughout the history of civilization”, as Ruuska, Heikkurinen and Wilén, three economists based in Helsinki, claim, “politics has been a human-centred process” (2020: 1), it has been, in short, “anthropolitics” – or an anthropocentric approach to politics based on domination, power, and supremacist exploitation by (some) humans of other humans and nonhumans. However, if there is agreement on something like the Anthropocene, politics now depends on the awareness that it affects everything on this planet. And although humans, of course, continue to be important actors in this situation and have to bear the ethical responsibility alone for their actions, their interests can no longer be automatically at the centre of all political processes. We can thus begin to imagine a postanthropolitics in a de-anthropocentred world. This, obviously, will be meeting plenty of resistance and can also be taken into all kinds of dangerous directions. One of these is certainly transhumanist, or: how I stopped being human and learned to love artificial intelligence, a continuation of humanism and anthropocentrism by other, extreme, means. One could call this “humanism without humans”.

However, there are also less nihilistic versions I would hope. My proposition, instead, would be: thinking humans without humanism. Our responsibility is towards others, both human and nonhuman with whom we share a world that is not ours alone. “We are animals together with other animals, in all sorts of ways”, as David Wood rightly reminds us (2020: 5). But we also have to see that any voluntary move towards postanthropocentrism is taking place at a time when we are already losing control of “our” systems – the Anthropocene, ironically, is just that: the phantasm of humans reigning supreme, while arguing themselves out of the picture. The predominant political and economic system is already “posthumanist” in the worst

possible, dehumanising and necropolitical, sense. Extracting ourselves by a misguided version of disembodied perfectibility in the hope of escaping the mess we've created looks pretty shabby. Instead, I'd suggest, with David Wood, that we're better off reminding ourselves that, yes, we are animals with animal bodies depending on a "natural" environment that we're responsible for "denaturing", which in some sense makes us special but doesn't lift us above anybody else apart from ethical and ecological responsibility: "We are both more animal than we can imagine and more than animal. Maintaining this tension is arguably more productive than developing zones of indistinction", as Wood puts it (2020: 22). I would add, echoing Rousseau, this tension is the source of our perfectibility without perfection, our "potentiality". Or, in other words, the future of our animality is the key and the main battleground of any (post)anthropolitics.

To finally address the question raised by the organisers of this event: What is left of being human? Obviously, as long as the human forms the centre of anthropolitics, left and also right of it, there are two figures: the animal and the posthuman. These two are left of humans and their being, they are also in a sense what is left of being human. If you ask me to choose between these two the choice is easy. I, for one, will always care more about animals than posthumans. For me, the former are infinitely closer to "us", even if, in the eyes of some, that might make me a "bioconservative". So be it, if bioconservative means caring about biological life and its future that's a price worth paying and a stance worth defending.

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