

Camilla Domenella, Macerata

HUMAN ENHANCEMENT AND THE *GEIST*'S PATH OF PERFECTIONING:  
SOME REFLECTIONS

G.W.F Hegel's philosophy of Spirit could be read as the Geist's path of perfectioning in which humankind is the instrument through which absolute Geist (spirit) achieves total self-consciousness. From this starting point, I examine the extent to which transhumanism draws upon and extends a long-standing theme in Western philosophy, according to which humans have the capacity to overcome their natural and biological *diminutio* becoming perfect by the means of technology. After introducing the topic of Human Enhancement according to the transhumanist view, I discuss briefly how technological innovation allows their proponents to believe they are helping to bring forth extraordinary beings with vastly greater capacities than the current humanity. This transhumanist premise starts from three assumptions: 1) human nature is imperfect; 2) natural evolution alone is not enough to make humans perfect; 3) the world of nature is a problem to solve technologically. Through the Hegelian notions of Culture, Creation, Limit, and Second Nature I discuss humans will evolve beyond themselves by generating modes of consciousness that will make possible a self-realization not necessarily based on the *desire* of technological perfection and enhancement.

### **1. Human Enhancement: the transhumanist desire**

Human Enhancement (HE) is promoted by the Trans-humanist movement. Led mainly by philosophers - such as Nick Bostrom or Julian Savulescu - and engineers - such as Raymond Kurzweil -, Transhumanism defines itself as «the intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities»<sup>1</sup>.

We will not enter the ethical debate about the goals the Transhumanism movement would obtain but we can say that HE represents a process of transformation, modification, and development of human abilities and performances employing an *intentional use* of knowledge and technologies<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "Transhumanist FAQ," Humanity+, accessed August 18, 2022, <<https://www.humanityplus.org/transhumanist-faq>>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Laura Palazzani, *Il Potenzamento Umano: Tecnoscienza, Etica e Diritto*, Torino 2015.

And that these transformations, modifications, and development of human abilities – for Transhumanists - are desirable.

The character of desirability is a cornerstone of philosophies supporting HE: desirability represents a sort of emotional engine of the HE processes which are aimed at common people now and in the future. Bostrom writes in this regard:

With continuing advances in science and technology, people are beginning to realize that some of the basic parameters of the human condition might be changed in the future. One important way in which the human condition could be changed is through the enhancement of basic human capacities<sup>3</sup>.

It is clear from these few lines how the topic of HE is not merely a philosophical exercise. The promotion of HE involves, first and foremost, the (self-)perceptions of people in general. And it is precisely this promotion that is philosophically justified. The purpose of HE (and the Transhumanism that supports it) is thus highly applicative and almost Promethean. It rests on a simple syllogism: since we have technologies, then we must use them to obtain our *desired* enhancement.

I say “*desired*” for a specific reason. The issue of desirability is the background and the theme of all positions in the field of HE. This is a key point to remark. On the basis of the arguments in support of HE there is one basic question: are we good enough? That is: are human beings good enough? And enough for what?

I support the claim that all the positions in the field of HE start from this assumption: human beings are imperfect, so all scientific achievements need to be used to improve human nature and the evolutionary process<sup>4</sup>. In other words, we can say that on the base arguments in support of HE, there are problems regarding the issue of perfection.

## 2. Problems with perfection

After clarifying the core of the transhumanist positions in support of HE, we can identify the problems regarding the issue of perfection.

First of all, in the transhumanist framework, there is a problem with human evolution.

According to the Transhumanist movement, the natural evolution of human beings corresponds to technological evolution. In other words, I evolve *because* technology evolves and

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<sup>3</sup> Nick Bostrom and Rebecca Roache, “Ethical Issues in Human Enhancement”, in *New Waves in Applied Ethics*, 2008, 120–52.

<sup>4</sup> Jure Zovko, “What Is so Specific about Moral Judgment in Bioethics?”, in *Bioethics Update* 5, no. 1 (January 2019): 25–33.

*thanks* to technology and scientific advances. In this sense, according to the HE advocates, our natural (biological and physiological) condition is the artificial (cultural and technical) one. Therefore, the current humanity need not be the endpoint of evolution.

Secondly, we notice that there is a problem about perfection with human nature.

Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress. For them, the human being is something that *should* be remolded in many desirable ways. By using science, technology, and other rational means, we shall eventually manage to become something different: that is, beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have. So that is why for HE supporters, the natural dimension of the human condition is a kind of ballast, a dead weight, which must be freed through technical advances. In this light, our biological nature – that is, our organism - is only an imperfect support that must be improved, and our work-in-progress human nature must precisely coincide with the technical work-in-progress

Thirdly, there is a problem regarding the issue of perfection with nature and the world, in general.

Transhumanists refuse the romantic idea of the «wisdom of nature». Rather, they propose an «Evolutionary Optimality Challenge» based on an Evolutionary Heuristic starting from the assumption that nature is unwise<sup>5</sup>. This assertion comes from an arbitrary judgment that serves as a significant premise of any logic on HE: nature is not enough, so technologies must supply. In this light, nature - of which human nature is an expression - is only a background layer for evolving human beings and it is not considered as something needed or an eco-system in which we live. For this reason, nature is imperfect, and it is a problem: it does not participate in an evolutionary process that is driven by technologies instead.

In the transhumanist framework, science and technologies look like external and transcendent forces, as if they are not products or applications of humankind's knowledge.

That is a crucial point. Because this issue leads to other problems with perfection, regarding the concepts of Culture and Creation. According to Transhumanists, culture is the opposite of nature. If nature has no *status* in itself, and, as a consequence, has no value, culture is the only dimension for human beings. For HE supporters, there is neither a dialectical process between nature and culture nor a *continuum* nature-culture. Culture represents all the artificial and technological discoveries, applications, devices and so on, that must be welcomed, accepted, implemented, and used to modify nature.

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<sup>5</sup> Nick Bostrom and Anders Sandberg, “The Wisdom of Nature: An Evolutionary Heuristic for Human Enhancement,” in *Philosophical Issues in Pharmaceutics*, ed. Dien Ho, vol. 122, Philosophy and Medicine, Dordrecht Netherlands 2017, 189–219.

Also, the concept of Creation represents a problem regarding the issue of perfection. In the trans-humanist framework, Creation is a Re-Creation by the means of technologies to remold and reshape human beings in increasingly better performative ways.

For all these reasons, it becomes clear that at the basis of HE, there is the idea of an autonomous and self-directed neoliberal individual, from which the transhumanist position comes<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, any positions in favor of HE hides utilitarian and strongly individualistic roots, which place the emphasis on the freedom of the individual in the context of a present and future society based on a global logic of performance to fit mass paradigms<sup>7</sup>.

Bionconservative thinkers react to all these issues by emphasizing the intrinsic normativity of nature, from which the human condition arises as already perfect and, therefore, untouchable. Even their positions hide problems regarding the issue of perfection.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Hegel: *Geist*'s path of perfecting

So, all these problems regarding the issue of perfection could be explained, and justified by the Hegelian *Geist*'s course of perfecting? Of course, yes and no at the same time.

I argue that an updated reading of Hegel's view of world history and *Geist*'s path of perfecting may help to illuminate aspects of the transhumanist vision and its critical issues. The updating is needed because trans-humanism: a) emphasizes much more so than Hegel the role played by technological innovation in bringing about the human future; and, b) posits that humankind itself will be eclipsed by beings endowed with far more "god-like" power and capacities than envisioned by Hegel.<sup>9</sup>

First, we know that, for Hegel, substance becomes subject when nature becomes self-consciousness in the form of humankind. The notion of subject in Hegel is fundamental and it represents the main difference with Spinoza's notion of substance. The Hegelian subject is something that becoming and not a substance that lies and remains always the same.

But, in Hegel, the true subject of world history is not humankind: the true subject is the *Geist* at work *in* and *through* humankind. And we know that *Geist* is Spirit, God, and Mind.

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<sup>6</sup> Luna Dolezal, "Morphological Freedom and Medicine: Constructing the Posthuman Body", in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities Book*, 2016, 310–24.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Fox, "Cyborgs, Robots and Society: Implications for the Future of Society from Human Enhancement with in-the-Body Technologies," in *Technologies* 6, no. 2 (2018): 50.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Eric Cohen, "Conservative Bioethics and the Search for Wisdom" in *Hastings Center Report* 36, no. 1 (2006): 44–56; Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, New York 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Zimmerman, "The Singularity: A Crucial Phase in Divine Self-Actualization?", in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 4, no. 1–2 (2008): 362.

Nevertheless, *Geist* cannot be understood as radically transcendent, apart from the world. Instead, *Geist* emptied itself into Creation and then undertook the long journey required to attain absolute self-consciousness and self-identity. Self-consciousness and self-identity are the *Geist*'s perfection.

At the same time, Culture is a creation of the self-conscious and self-creative Spirit; the process of its development and fulfillment is the process of spiritual World perfection and manifestation. More precisely, Culture is the spiritually anthropological development, cumulative creation of the Absolute as Spirit-World-Human.

Moreover, Creation in Hegel constitutes the Otherness needed to generate self-consciousness, but self-consciousness can occur only through humankind. After placing an Other to itself in the form of nature, which is *Geist* extended in space, *Geist* subsequently manifests itself as conscious humankind, which then sets about to know and thus assimilate otherness constituted by extended nature.

So, at this point, we can untangle the issue. To summarize, we can say that humankind is the instrument through which absolute *Geist* (Spirit) achieves total self-consciousness. But, at the same time, humankind brings itself to self-awareness. Eventually, humans will evolve beyond themselves by generating modes of consciousness and technology that will make possible cosmic self-realization.

#### **4. Hegel: Concept of Limit**

In this light, it becomes fundamental to address the issue of Limit: it could represent a theoretical keystone and then an ethical *discrimen* when we talk about HE.

We know that Hegel makes a distinction between Limit (*Grenze*) and Barrier or Limitation (*Schranke*). The finite has a Limit (*Grenze*) that is an inner limitation inasmuch the latter is its own determination. As an inner Limitation, *Schranke* corresponds to the *ought to be* (*Sollen*) of the finite. And as *ought to be*, the finite is something that both is and is not at the same time. In this framework, Limit (*Grenze*) is a sort of contact point between finitude and infinitude, inner and outer, otherness and identity. And that's precisely because it contains a contradiction, thus it is dialectical, and it represents a needed moment for the actualization.

Hegel writes:

In Being-there-and-then the negation is still directly one with the Being, and this negation is what we call a Limit (*Grenze*). A thing is what it is, only *in* and *by reason* of its limit. We cannot therefore regard the limit as only external to Being which is then and there.

It rather goes through and through every part of such definite Being. [...] Man, if he wishes to be actual, must be-there-and-then, and to this end he must set a limit to himself. People who are too fastidious towards the finite, never reach actuality, but linger lost in abstractions, and their light gradually dies away.<sup>10</sup>

So, as Hegel seems to suggest, Limit is something that we can push beyond itself over and over again but, at the same time, it is something that always defines us because it permits actualization.

## Conclusions

Transhumanists seem not to consider any *dialectical* process between nature and culture, natural and artificial, finite and infinite. They promote HE in a perspective that refuses to talk about limit. According to HE promoters limit is a limitation to human potential and technical possibilities in the present and in the future. For them, thus Limit is both the expression of the insufficiency of nature and an unreasonable barrier to technological hybridization.

The “dream” about human optimization relies on two main concepts at the basis of the transhumanist view: desirability and individual freedom. These two concepts relate to each other. The topic of desirability appeals to the insufficiency of nature and the pursuit of supposed perfection. From the transhumanist perspective, the insufficiency of nature becomes an ontological-anthropological failure to fix by biotechnological means. If nature (human nature) is not enough, we must seek forms of perfection *outside* of nature. Hence the emphasis on the intentional use of technologies and their use as an evolutionary means.

The pursuit of perfection refers to a very specific concept of freedom. Freedom, for transhumanists, is the freedom of the individual in the context of a society based on the global logic of performance. As a consequence, perfection is “to *fit* in” mass paradigms, being more productive, being more attractive, being more powerful. Freedom is thus reduced to the simple options of choosing the artificial means by which to achieve these statuses.

On this point, we want to draw the Hegelian notion of «second nature», as the life world which is a result of the creativity of the human spirit, «in which freedom is present as *necessity*»<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel: Translated From The Encyclopaedia Of The Philosophical Sciences*, London 1874, 148.

<sup>11</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, New York 1970, 32.

Also, the notion of «second nature» together with the explanation of the Spirit's path of perfecting, allows us to present the human condition as an “ambiguous” condition, made of nature and culture, natural and artificial-technological, finitude and infinitude, imperfection and perfection.

In this light, humankind does not represent a *problem* regarding the issue of perfection. Human beings are neither imperfect nor perfect: instead, they are human *becomings* in the *Geist's* path to perfection which is self-consciousness and self-identity. So, technologies - and scientific knowledge and applications - are part of the world human history, that is: manifestations and progressive actualizations of the Spirit.

In conclusion, I claim that this Hegelian reading enables us to reject both strict trans-humanist positions and strict bioconservative positions (that argue in defense of human nature as if it were completely perfect).

In this sense, I assert that: (1) the human condition is neither a kind of ballast that must be freed by means of technical and technological advances nor a “natural” territory to defend, full of limits beyond which humankind cannot push; (2) the evolution of human beings corresponds to the evolution of the whole of humankind in terms of “cosmic” self-realization; (3) at the basis of these argumentations, there is the issue of perfection, which I interpret as a path of self-awareness and not as the corresponding of the individual to the mass paradigm.

In this light, we must re-read Hegel and consider human evolution - with its nature, its culture, and its technologies - as *Aufhebung*, which is both overcoming and maintenance. Therefore, perfection is an ever-renewing path that leads to self-consciousness and self-awareness in a "cosmic" perspective capable of considering humankind in the present and in the future and capable of being aware of humanity as a principle.

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Dr. Camilla Domenella  
piazza Annessione, 17  
62100 Macerata  
Italia  
c.domenella@unimc.it