

BEYOND CORONAVIRUS: NATURE, TECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN IDENTITY

Maria Annarumma

University of Salerno, Italy

E-mail: mannarumma@unisa.it

The great catastrophes of humanity – be it the plague of 1347 or that of 1629, the Spanish flu of 1918, the tsunami of 2004, the Coronavirus of 2020 – are all showing that, despite scientific progress or the arrogance of the “Promethean syndrome”, the human being is constantly in danger. Violently and unexpectedly dropped in an atypical situation, which has subverted values and annihilated ancient certainties, we keep convincing ourselves that nothing will be the same. We try to hypothesize scenarios, outline reference frames, look ahead to the future. Probably, after the first months of austerity, of virtuous assertions about moral commitments to restore the frugality of customs as well as considerations about the sense of death and destiny, we will be carried away by the joy of having survived and we just would like to forget what happened. We will be rejecting the memory of suffering, bereavement, hospitals and intensive care. We will try to forget painful traces and go back to saying yes to life.

We live both in a natural ecosystem and in a technological environment that wraps our lives. We undoubtedly must preserve nature; still it is stronger than the man who lives in it. Furthermore, nature is capable, at any moment, even when it seems to be at the end of its resistance, to recover the scene, as it has been doing in these months of spread of the virus. Therefore, instead of joining the chorus of the Erinyes who invoke vengeance against the exploiting and arrogant man, should we not try to preserve ourselves, to guard what we are and what we have? We can all certainly achieve this goal by respecting the environment where we live and its sense of limit, by respecting man in his dignity and by using critical reason, without giving up on far-sightedness.

On the other hand, Prometheus, major symbol of pride, is indeed the responsible for the advent of technique but also the titan who, driven by an altruistic force that originated the human existential condition, undergoes a terrible and eternal punishment for his generosity; he is the refined thinker, promoter of the path towards civilization, whose fire represents one of the most important epic moments. Human life must be defended as well as the earth must be defended. Without exaltation or mutual demonization because they are both essential to each other.

Jonas, one of the major critics of human indifference to the world’s destiny, in his *The Imperative of Responsibility* puts us in a scenario where the individual perspective disappears, and an ethics of the socio-political community resolutely arises. His point of view is not an anthropocentric ethics nor is it merely naturocentric. Indeed, it is planetary and it is expressed according to a new formula of the deontological Kantian ethics “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life [...] Act so that the effects of your action do not destroy the future potential of such life [...] Do not endanger the conditions of undefined human survival on earth” (cf. Jonas, 1990).

Hence, we must realize that there is a humanity to be saved: just as we would not experience the sacredness of life if murders were not committed or the value of freedom if there was no threat of slavery, one must be aware of what could happen in the future along with the risk of the real loss of man's identity. There is a need for "a heuristics of fear" (Usak et al. 2020): a sort of intellectual fear related to the new generations and therefore an ethical duty towards those who are not there yet. The new ethics does not simply concern the duty towards our children, but towards the future generations, those who are not born yet, who may accuse us for the living conditions that we will have left to them. It is also true, however, that just as there is a right for posterity to exist, there is also the right for humanity to be there *hic et nunc*.

We must take care of the future of the Being, the being as humanity and the being as nature. The world exists and the human being exists, too: both are necessary to each other. Beauty itself arises from an alchemy between nature and the human being, in a relationship as deep as inseparable. The universe is around us. We cannot deny its presence, but what would it be without man? Would the universe exist without an intelligence to think at it? Would its beauty exist without a gaze to contemplate it? Would it exist without a consciousness to recognize it? Surely. It is autonomous, but what sense would it have if we disappeared? What would it be without man? Beautiful and unspoiled, but for whom? Cities, towns, villages, even the deserted countryside of these days remind us of an absence of humanity that saddens us notwithstanding a lush and resplendent nature. Finally, pure but wrapped in an eerie silence. Without human voices. But we are still there.

And we wonder: what is our condition? The one we are experiencing in this constraint, where our needs are reduced to pure biology? Get up, eat, sleep, satisfy the primary survival needs or rather go outdoors, immerse ourselves in nature, keep up relationships with people, hug, explore the world, get to know other cultures, mix with them, be contaminated by diversity, pray together, sing together, live together? Are we just nature or also culture? And how is technology changing our lives, which keep being shaped as Marshall McLuhan stated with his everlasting quote "The medium is the message and the message is message"?

The situation created by the Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the increasingly structural role that Information Technologies have acquired in relation to our lives. Artificial Intelligence and Big Data have been proposed as the only processes capable of limiting the incidence of contagion by means of contact tracing practices (Ferretti et al., 2020). These processes, however, seem to put a strain on some fundamental rights, for example privacy. Therefore, the issue that is worth analysing does not just concern democracy as the means to identify our rulers; indeed, we should refer to the universal principles of constitutional democracy both for the democratic forms of government and the classification of fundamental rights.

This challenge means considering these technological developments not just as a tool among many others but the boundaries of human progress and should therefore contemplate a reordering of consolidated values. By this, one should not assume a *tout court* liquidation of the patrimony of rights, but rather rethink them.

Obviously, deploying specific technologies and taking measure is not without risks. Precisely for this reason, a critical theory that measures up to the information society is an unavoidable request, especially since we should not be considering the traditional categories. This applies, for example, to the traditional dominant-dominated dyad, called into question precisely in relation to the use of digital surveillance devices.

The history of technology shows that technological change is unstoppable. Ray Kurzweil argues that progress cannot be stopped and that any attempt to slow down or reject the increase of "positive technologies" cannot avoid the development of the "dangerous" ones too. We must not stop, but rather be aware of the dangers of science and create suitable institutions and regulations to be sure that it will never get out of control (Davies, 1989, 2007).

It goes without saying, multiple subjects will try to take advantage of the use of tracking apps, biometric surveys, surveillance cameras, etc.; nonetheless, trying to encapsulate these dangers in the eternal dispute between dominant and dominated seems a simplification, at least for two reasons.

First of all, as some recent studies have shown, the custodians of political power are no longer the "overseers", but mainly the new giants of the *net economy* capitalism, such as Google, Microsoft, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, etc. and for this reason, liberal democracy requires the

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implementation of new management tools unbiased towards political and economic dynamics. The challenge is harsh, though very ambitious.

The earth is the meeting place for different beings, all involved in the drama of an existence that occurs on it, an existence that must try to be as relationship-oriented as possible, always focusing on new ways to build a humanistic ecology in which nature, culture and technologies, co-belonging to the same horizon, coexist without prevarications or gratuitous violence; nonetheless, bearing in mind that, in any case, it will never be possible to completely avoid conflicts or boundaries nor can an unachievable Edenic condition be restored. In this, as before and as always, our critical reason comes to our aid, acting on a substratum of corporeality. We are indeed part of the nature, yet with our essential peculiarities: had we better give up on them or rather claim them?

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Maria Annarumma

PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Human, Philosophical and Educational Sciences, University of Salerno, Via Giovanni Paolo II, 132, 84084 Fisciano (SA), Italy.

E-mail: mannarumma@unisa.it

Website: <https://docenti.unisa.it/020320/en/home>
