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Humans, Angels, And Cyborgs Aboard Theseus' Ship

Metaphysics, Mythology,
and Mysticism in Trans-/
Posthumanist
Philosophies

Mattia Geretto

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*La semplicità è il dono commisurato alla verità.
(Simplicity is the gift commensurate with truth).
M. Geretto*

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ABBREVIATIONS

A+series+volume+page	Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1923ff.). <i>Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe</i> . Berlin: Akademie Verlag. In A.VI.4, before the page number, there is a further specification indicated by the possible Volume A, B, or C.
AG+page	G.W. Leibniz (1989). <i>Philosophical Essays</i> , Edited and Translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.
DK+conventional technical references	Diels H., Kranz W. (Eds.) (1951–1952 – 6th ed.). <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i> . Berlin: Weidmann.
GP+volume+page	Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1875–1890). <i>Die philosophischen Schriften</i> , ed. C.I. Gerhardt. Berlin: Weidmann.
LCL+volume	“The Loeb Classical Library” (followed by scientific responsibility). Cambridge (MA) et al.: Harvard University Press.

LM+conventional technical references	<i>Early Greek Philosophy</i> (from the “The Loeb Classical Library”, Voll. 524–529). Edited and translated by André Laks and Glenn W. Most in collaboration with Gérard Journée and assisted by Leopoldo Iribarren.
<i>Mon.</i> +§ number	Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz [1714], <i>Principes de la Philosophie</i> or the so-called <i>Monadologie</i> (<i>Monadology</i>) – followed by GP abbreviations.
TSP	Theseus’ Ship Paradox

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented challenges of contemporaneity. In this manifesto/study various famous “mythical figures” will be the starting point for a journey through unprecedented challenges posed not only by the avant-gardes of technology and science but also by those thinkers proposing a new philosophical awareness for human beings. The avant-garde philosophical thought that will be considered is now commonly referred to as transhumanism and posthumanism or, with a single umbrella expression, “post-human thought”.¹ This work is intended for all those who wish to keep up with challenges that today more than ever seem to undermine the traditional concepts of nature, human identity, culture, the whole sphere of human inter-relations, the entire sphere of religious experience, and ultimately of philosophy itself.

Eternal symbols. The decision to adopt some figures from Greek mythology as guiding elements in the development of this study was also dictated by the richness of meanings that can be found in those symbols, endowed with a strength that does not seem to be weakened by the passage of time. All mythical tales, and in this case, those related to Theseus, exhibit paradigmatic images that lend themselves well to deal also with the aforementioned issues. The fact that we can refer to certain symbolic images (the ship, minotaur, labyrinth, thread) without these being obsolete for our

¹For the sake of clarity, in referring to posthumanism—in the form that will be mainly considered here, i.e. the one revolving around Rosi Braidotti’s conception—I will use exclusively the adjective “posthumanist”, leaving the adjectival form “posthuman” for the particular term used by transhumanists or for the umbrella expression.

philosophical research derives from the fact that they are symbols perhaps inherited from an ancestral, primordial knowledge, suspended in time and history and still capable from time to time, within various historical periods, to be eternally taken up and relived. Moreover, the use of mythical symbolism is in perfect harmony with the very birth of philosophy: the importance of myth for the development of philosophical thought usually runs the risk of being easily underestimated.

The ship of Theseus. The first mythical-symbolic image that we will encounter, starting with Chap. 2, is linked to what is now called the paradox of the ship of Theseus, that is, the idea of being able to perpetuate indefinitely an object/artifact resulting from the assembly of several parts by means of a continuous renewed replacement of all the elements composing it. Therefore, the question is whether the object/artifact, despite the replacement of all its parts, still retains its identity. This paradigmatic image will allow us to sketch a comparative study between specific conceptions of the human being drawn from the entire span of the history of philosophy and current contemporary trans-/posthumanist perspectives. Some angelological doctrines and current technological perspectives on cyborgs will also be considered here, as further proof of the fact that the confrontation with an “ultra-human tension” has always been typical of human nature. The problem of the ship of Theseus is therefore used as a heuristic tool to outline a *mereology of the human being* through which to test the metaphysical/epistemological limits of contemporary perspectives on the human being. The objective of that investigation is to highlight the limits of a mereology of the human being, emphasizing the irreducibility of some “parts” that do not lend themselves to being defined as “parts”, in particular consciousness and intelligence, entities that are difficult to separate from each other. The discriminating action of intelligence, its own and essential being able to identify units of sense/significance in the world, is the main leitmotif of my proposal for a re-reading of contemporary trans-/posthumanism.

Theseus and the Minotaur. In the mythic tale of Theseus’ killing of the Minotaur, we will consider four fundamental symbols, taken two by two and developed in Chap. 3: *Theseus and the Minotaur*, and *Ariadne and the Labyrinth*. I will use the first two characters to read the contemporary theme of chimerism and the monstrous. The minotaur myth illustrates well the comparison with the new “chimeras”, that is to say the new trans-/posthumanist hybrids (physical and conceptual). Ever-increasing multiform human hybridization seems to make the concept of human identity much more fluid than in the past. With respect to this “liquid”

human identity, life and death also become procedural and fluid entities, thus losing their traditional characteristics of absoluteness. With this in mind, examples of key guiding questions will be as follows: Are there any limits to hybridization between human and non-human living entities? What can the term “monster” still tell us nowadays? In today’s *keeping the monstrous at bay*, to what extent can we still speak of a renewed *hybrid*?

Once again it is intelligence, the common thread through which to make “sense” of these questions, especially where there is a comparison with the experience of non-human life or a comparison with the world of inorganic non-life. Indeed, even for animals and for the inorganic world the terms “thought”, “mind”, and “intelligence” are frequently adopted within the ambit of trans-/posthumanism, with the clear intention of refusing any kind of limitations, through a non-dualist perspective. While sharing the fascination of a granitically unitary vision, with even “mystical” potential, as we will see, my reading highlights at the same time the risk that this non-dualism could translate into banal materialistic reductionism, with a consequent mortal danger for the concept of “responsibility”.

Ariadne and the labyrinth. The second symbolic pair, through the thread of Ariadne/intelligence, will lead us into the multiple dimensions linked to the labyrinth, the infinite spiral of the alternating dance of death and rebirth. The archetypal complexity of the labyrinth, which also encompasses the concept of infinity, will lead us to consider how we can speak of a *mystical suggestion* both in transhumanism and in posthumanism, but above all in the latter: the “horizontal” dimension peculiar to posthumanism, referring to the equal dignity of all living beings—which together constitute “life” understood as “*zoe*”, without prevarications, hierarchies or privileges of species—are the basis for what I will term “immanent mysticism”. Within such “mysticism of immanence”, I will highlight the analogies and the main differences between two particular forms of “traditional mysticism”: Franciscan naturalism and the Eckhartian divine conception of nothingness. As regards transhumanism, I will also suggest a comparison with what has been called “Neo-Gnosticism”.

The heroes or the endeavor of philosophy. I shall now return to the concept of “hero” and in particular to the names of *Theseus* and *Ariadne*, which guide my interpretative proposal, which emerged after the encounter with the inspiring Summer School held in Utrecht by Rosi Braidotti in 2019 and 2020. In this study, well-known exponents of contemporary feminist thought often appear as interlocutors. However, I believe that the entire discourse on the posthuman cannot and should not have a single “depository”, which would inevitably end up constituting a partial and limiting

point of view. Intelligence has no gender and rather informs all possible genders of itself. Both Theseus and Ariadne are “heroes”, who in my reading, in various ways, personify the same philosophy, with the honest effort required by the genuine exercise of thought, committed to being thorough in their quests, on pain of being invalidated. In my reading proposal, Ariadne personifies intelligence of thought, intelligence that can neither become a surrogate nor be reduced to an “assembly of parts”. Theseus is the personification of philosophical endeavor in searching for the truth (no matter if it is a so-called post-truth as well). Both, at the same time, personify philosophy even in its too easily mistreated architectural-systematic component, which, through that architecture, does nothing but make a vision possible, even according to a certain aesthetic guise. Mythical heroes, the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, and the mystics (especially in Bergson’s use of the word) are therefore all terms that draw even closer to each other. It goes without saying that a mystical discourse can take on different meanings depending on how the terms “individual”, “single”, “all”, “life”, “matter”, “death”, and “spirit”—the latter basically conceived by me as “intelligence”—are understood, in themselves and in their mutual dialectical relations. The meeting with Braidotti was illuminating in several respects, but at the same time it made me understand that both transhumanist and posthumanist reflections neglected fundamental large areas of human experience, mainly perhaps due to a common metaphysical vision tending toward a radical materialism. My concluding mystical overview aims to allow room for the human experience of the “imponderable”, which will make sense if this perspective is not completely crushed under the weight of an exclusive materialist determinism. Legitimizing the inclusion of the imponderable is the task set by the “Preliminary Metaphysical Discourse” proposed as the opening chapter of this work (Chap. 1).

The illuminating darkness of metaphysics. My metaphysical proposal has its simplest aim in bringing back intelligence to its original character of *principle*. For this purpose, in the first chapter of this study several references are made to philosophers such as Bruno, Spinoza, and especially Leibniz. Returning to these philosophers seemed to me the simplest way to breathe fresh life into the desire for theoretical elaboration and comparison which is highly evident, especially in posthumanist thought. The most ambitious aspect of this metaphysical proposal is to promote the possibility of a posthuman thought with a different metaphysical basis. Specifically, it is a question of harmonizing an excess of materialism, with

a possible immaterial and even mystical counterpart (as Bergson also strove toward at the beginning of the last century).

In other words, with this study/manifesto, I intend to promote the possibility of a different interpretation/form of posthumanism, proudly alien to easy reductionism, open to the possibility of remaining within the problematic nature of dualism, without demonizing it and without seeing a limit to the strength of human intelligence. Human intelligence is the starting point for rising to the intelligibility of reality and for recognizing intelligence itself as a principle and not as a simple object among objects.

There is much talk of a “return to theory”, to the need for thinking, both realistic and systematic. Abuses and speculative hypertrophy in the past have rightly ended up arousing circumspection and suspicion and have deserved the implacable hammer of Nietzschean criticism. However, this does not mean that the fascination and the need for metaphysical concepts to exercise thought impose a constant recovery and a constant rethinking of “eternal” ideas, concepts, and images. This consequently imposes the need to never let one’s guard down regarding the philosophical duty to refine linguistic and conceptual tools continuously, and to dialogue with the great classics of the past, to take advantage of their testimony. It is then a question of reconsidering the opportunity of a less simplified mereology and looking at philosophers such as Deleuze—the philosopher who perhaps more than others has influenced posthumanist thought—from a perspective which is different from conventional views. In particular, I refer to the perspective of Deleuze’s “Neo-Leibnizianism” and to the fact that there are many Leibnizian suggestions which could generously broaden contemporary posthuman horizons.

Various questions are raised in this work, but none have been explored in a systematic and exhaustive way (if this could ever be possible in philosophy). What I intend to do by touching on numerous issues is rather to enhance the importance of the metaphysical perspective, through the simple consideration of intelligence as a principle. This metaphysical perspective, which makes abundant use in its methodology of the history of philosophy and of the vast symbolic/conceptual resources of mythological and mystical traditions, is ultimately aimed at raising awareness, demanding and taxing for anyone who ventures into these themes. As Bergson already invoked a century ago, it is a question of contributing to the affirmation of the need for a “spiritual complement” which the excessively positivist gaze dominating the cultural climate in which we are immersed constantly eliminates or rather, given that it cannot be eliminated, masks and hides.



Preliminary Metaphysical Discourse

Abstract Metaphysics here refers to that indispensable part of philosophy linked to the search for the foundation of reality and the definition of the relationship between reality itself and the subjects who know it. Transhumanism and posthumanism as philosophical movements also have their own metaphysics, which are rooted in contemporary naturalism, characterized by a materialistic and immanent vision of reality, in which the unity and autonomy of the human subject comes to lose all consistency, reducing itself to a mere mass or agglomeration of parts. The main risk of this loss of the subject's autonomy is the loss of any real importance of concepts such as "intelligence" and "responsibility". This chapter invites transhumanists and posthumanists to be open to dialogue on the metaphysics of authors such as Bruno and Leibniz and to recover the autonomy of intelligence considered as a principle and as a basis for the autonomy of the subject. At the same time, I intend to promote the importance of a metaphysical mythopoeia also equipped with its own characteristic conceptual instruments ("individual", "parts-whole relationship", "vagueness"), with the aim of keeping pace with contemporary scientific-technological progress and to satisfy the eternal human demands for narratives of life and death.

Keywords Metaphysics • Intelligence • Immaterialism • Responsibility • Mythopoesis • Vagueness

I THE NEED FOR METAPHYSICS AND ITS TRAGIC AND PRACTICAL DESTINY

The term *metaphysics* in this preliminary discourse may deter the reader from browsing the rest of the book. Yet, metaphysics, with all the complex doctrines that can be traced back to it, such as the doctrine of the immaterial nature of thought and of knowledge proves to be one of the most important tools we have in order to address the most radical questions about life and death. For example, who would have thought that the primary cause of the death of the champion of eighteenth-century European materialism, Julien Offray De La Mettrie, was a non-material cause, in the sense that although he consumed the spoiled flesh of pheasant *pâté*, or whatever else he had eaten, the great French philosopher died primarily because he wanted to freely self-medicate by using a specific therapy, the result of his theoretical conceptions that made him think first of all of purging his blood through bloodletting. That decision made him choose one path instead of another. If he had listened to the advice of those who suggested an alternative method, it is not certain that his last supper would have been fatal to him. What would have saved De La Mettrie, rather than his treatment, would have been intelligence and ideas, impalpable, imponderable objects which are mysteriously embodied within us.

Metaphysics is not a story to fall asleep to peacefully in the evening (which would not be so bad, especially if it were a good story). Metaphysics is supported by a certain set of arguments, and since these arguments belong to the order of thought and not of matter, the first admirable consequence that derives from them is that metaphysics is in any case necessary. As Aristotle had already argued in his *Protrepticus*, philosophy is undeniable and even those who wished to deny it only reaffirmed its necessity. Likewise, even if some individuals wish to deny metaphysics, judging it to be inconclusive or useless knowledge, they put forth arguments, of course, arguments in the same line of thought. In other words, they reveal their own conceptions of thought, matter, and intelligence and therefore do nothing but contrast metaphysics with another kind of metaphysics, thereby proving, *ipso facto*, not only its importance but also its necessity.

The famous Kantian analysis on the limits of metaphysics considered a science certainly failed to put an end to metaphysical reflection, as did Nietzsche's philosophizing with a hammer or the insults of the neopositivists. There is something terribly *human* in metaphysics that survives every