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Human dignity in the age of technology. The Neoenvironmentality paradigm

For evident reasons this will be a very brief exposition of a proposal, that I have discussed at length elsewhere¹. Nevertheless, I hope it will be sufficiently clear.

This paper exposes the outcome of my research activity concerning the establishment of a *philosophical anthropology of technology*, i.e. a «philosophy of technology in the nominative case (*filosofia della tecnica al nominativo*)»². This philosophy of technology is grounded on the concept of *Neoenvironmentality*. This approach culminates in a new definition:

- 1) of *man's humanity*;
- 2) and of *technology*.

I will proceed by providing a new definition of man and technology as they result from this approach, then I will highlight the structural connection between the establishment of technology in a systemic guise (i.e., as *Neoenvironment*) and the resulting danger for human dignity.

At first, it is necessary to give a preliminary reply to an objection that seems reasonable to some extent, but that also proves to be ineffective regarding the real question, which is here at stake. This objection is the following: it is not clear whether “animality” – granted that such a thing really exists – corresponds to the so-called environmentality. It must be clear that the theory I am proposing does not state such an equation. Even if the hypothesis of animal environmentality turned out to be a simple anthropological projection, what would really matter for this exposition is the capability of such a projection to establish a criterion of recognisability for man, namely the capability to mark a boundary beyond which human being would fail to recognize itself as such. Therefore, the equation between environmentality and animality, conceived as a thought experiment, works only as a necessary term of comparison to indicate that an “environmentalized” man – that is, a man inhibited in his worldhood. And this seems to be the human type produced by technology in its systemic version – would be unrecognisable to the man himself.

¹ See: Cera 2007; Cera 2012; Cera 2013.

² Volpi 2004: 146-147.

1. A definition of man

The premise of my anthropological consideration is the epochal awareness that the *essence* cannot be predicated of man anymore; this awareness, however, does not mean that we must give up identifying some set of elements that can characterise man properly. In this regard, definitions such as “human essence” or “human nature” are replaced here by that of *anthropic perimeter*. This definition takes into account those philosophical-anthropological considerations that, from Herder to Gehlen, gave birth to the paradigm of *Mängelwesen* (deficient being).

While shifting from *natura hominis* to *conditio humana*, the peculiarity of man is not to be found in the *What* any longer, but in the *How*. His way of being characterises itself through the relationship that he establishes with the framework in which he is contained. As a matter of fact, his “being in” (*in-sistere*) such framework is always already “being distant”; such *in-sistere* is always already an *ex-sistere*. Man’s *Dasein* is ek-sistence: this is his fundamental peculiarity.

Due to his lacking biological endowment, man (deficient being) is bound by nature to mould his own *vital space*. Only in this way, the initial setting or *milieu* (*Umgebung*) can become *world*. From this it follows that the world «is not a *datum*, but a *dandum*»³. I will call this natural human feature *worldhood*, by reference to Jakob von Uexküll’s *Umweltlehre*, in the re-interpretation given by Gehlen and Heidegger⁴, and by reference to his distinction between *man* and *animal*, where the former has a *world* (*Welt*) and the latter has a *mere environment* (*Umwelt*). It is possible to agree with Heidegger when he says that the fundamental peculiarity of man is his «*world-forming*» (*weltbildend*)⁵ ability. Being *world-forming*, he is a naturally technological being: he has an intrinsic demiurgic vocation. Anthropogenesis and technogenesis are synonyms.

On the contrary, the ecological niche of the animal is its environment: a natural mould with which it corresponds completely and immediately. In the case of the animal, the environment expresses itself as absolute self-giveness. As Günther Anders stated «the animal does not come into the world but its world comes with him»⁶. This means that the animal is not able to experience any *Umgebung*, namely that framework functioning as an indeterminate background for its concrete vital space. Therefore, the peculiarity of the animal consists in its *environmentality*, in its being «*poor in world*» (*weltarm*) as Heidegger affirmed⁷.

Given such a premise, the difference between man and animal cannot be entirely ascribed to a biological perspective, but it will be at least necessary to place it within an ecological context. Indeed, what differs is their relationship with their corresponding *oikos*.

³ Accarino 1991: 30.

⁴ See: Gehlen 1988; Heidegger 1995; Uexküll 1921; Uexküll 2010.

⁵ See: Heidegger 1995: 274-366.

⁶ See: Anders 1935: 65-66.

⁷ See: Heidegger 1995: 186-267.

The animal and its ecological niche form an inseparable unity, that is, an individual or even a monad. This means that the animal experiences neither its own *as such* nor that of its environment. Heidegger wrote: «The animal as such does not stand within a manifestness of beings»⁸.

This also involves a structural diversity concerning human and animal *adaptive performances*. *The animal is apt insofar as it is adapted*, its adaptation being *energeiai, in actu*: from the very beginning, it is ready for its *oikos*. On the contrary, *man is apt insofar as he is adaptable*, his adaptation expresses itself *dynamei, in potentia*: in other words, through his technological-demiurgic ability, he is able to cover the initial distance between himself and his own setting.

Since man's world corresponds to an indeterminate background that must be shaped by him, the initial condition for human being is not to be found in its proximity to its own ecological niche, rather, as I said, in its distance (*ex-sistere*) from it. As a result, the essential directionality of man's worldforming activity can be defined (with a term by Heidegger) as «de-severance» (*Ent-fernung*)⁹, as approximation. In other words: as the passing of the original condition of «world-strangeness» (*Weltfremdheit*, as Günther Anders said) or «world-openness» (*Weltoffenheit*, as Max Scheler said)¹⁰. Activity, and technological activity in the first place, is essentially de-severant since man is by nature a «creature of distance (*Wesen der Ferne*)»¹¹.

Besides it must be pointed out that when I speak of the world, I do not refer only to a physical-biological correlate. Indeed, man's ecological niche consists also of all those elements that constitute the so-called «cultural sphere». Each specific world that is concretely shaped by man equates with that particular type of framework that we call «epoch». It follows that man's worldhood corresponds to his *historicity*. The salient trait of the indissoluble relationship between man and world is the *Geschehen* of *Geschichte*, namely the historical happening in its authenticity. Therefore, insofar as man is an historical being, he can reveal himself as a worldly and not merely as an environmental being.

Now, while following Heidegger's suggestion in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, I will place both man's worldhood and animal's environmentality in a *pathic presupposition*: namely, in those *fundamental moods* (*Grundstimmungen*) that refer each of them to their respective findingness (*Befindlichkeit*). In the case of the animal, such a *pathos* corresponds to the *captivation* (*Benommenheit*)¹², which upholds its fusion with its respective vital space. *Benommenheit* is structurally circular: it falls back on itself, so the fundamental animal pathos essentially corresponds to *apatheia*, namely, to a sensitivity, which is incapable of self-perception.

⁸ Heidegger 1995: 248.

⁹ Heidegger 2001: 139.

¹⁰ See: Anders 1937; Scheler 2009.

¹¹ Heidegger 1929: 135.

¹² See: Heidegger 1995: 236-257.

On the contrary, man possesses the *Grundstimmung* that enables him to transcend his own within-the-world rootedness, i.e., to perceive the unreachable background, which is the condition of possibility for every world, and so to experience the world itself as such. This can be called *thaumazein*, that uncanny/unhomely (*unheimlich*) original pathos, which will later become the well-known *theorein* (contemplation) when it is ordered by *logos*.

2. A definition of technology

2) Given this anthropological premise, technology emerges as a *possible oikos for today's humanity*. Therefore, in this context the term "technology" does not indicate the totality of single technologies – because «the essence of technology is by no means anything technological»¹³ –, rather it outlines the worldview that has made them possible and that manifests itself as a very particular historical circumstance. That is, the synthesis between *disenchantment* (*Entzauberung*) and *rationalization* (*Rationalisierung*), under the imperative of *feasibility* (*Machbarkeit*).

Jacques Ellul provides an incisive summary of this process. Moving from the presupposition that «there is no common denominator between the *technique* of today and that of yesterday»¹⁴, Ellul distinguishes among *technical operation*, *technical phenomenon* and *technical system*. «The technical operation includes every operation carried out in accordance with a certain method in order to attain a particular end». The technical phenomenon stands out from the background of technical operations and it introduces the technological *ratio operandi* in any human context, that is, «in every field men seek to find the most efficient method»¹⁵. Afterwards, the synthesis between technical phenomenon and technical progress generates «the technical system»: «having become a *universum* of means and media, technology is in fact the environment of man»¹⁶. And since it is environment, it requires nothing but adaptation.

Therefore, in the time frame of several centuries technology frees itself from its ancillary status, transforming into a completely unprecedented historical event. This happens when man tries to achieve thoroughly one of his innate inclinations: that is, the compensatory countermovement¹⁷ regarding his own ek-static tension, the drive of the deficient being that wants to stabilise/immunise the totality of being completely. Such an inclination was already expressed by Plato in his *Cratylus* with the definition «*bebaiotes tes ousias*»¹⁸.

The age of technology begins when it becomes *really* (that is, effectively, *wirklich*) *possible* (that is, feasible, *machbar*) to universalise this compensatory immunising *pharmakon*. And as soon as this

¹³ Heidegger 1953: 4.

¹⁴ Ellul 1964: 146.

¹⁵ Ellul 1964: 19, 21.

¹⁶ Ellul 1980: 38.

¹⁷ See: Gehlen 1988: 351-364; Marquard 1983.

¹⁸ Plato, *Cratylus*, 386a 3-4.

universalisation occurs, then possibility – which is now reduced only to the possibility of making (something) – becomes cogency and destiny: «*what can be made, must be made*». Inexorably¹⁹. The possibility (*Können*) of making (something) becomes necessity (*Sollen*) of making (something) and, at last, obligation (*Müssen*) not to refrain from making (something). The reality is no more *Realität*, nor *Wirklichkeit*, but *Machbarkeit*. «Raw-material-being is *criterium existendi*. Being is being raw material»²⁰.

The age of technology corresponds to the eclipse of the cosmological difference between *Welt* and *Menschenwelt* (world and human world) – I refer to Karl Löwith for this distinction –, namely to the concealment of the *mundus rerum* performed by the *mundus hominum*. However, without the world as such no human world is possible, therefore *technology* (conceived as a “universalised human world”) *can achieve a worldly status only while being a non-world, that is an environment*, by eroding man’s worldhood. On the other side, this is a new type of environment and thus it can be called *neo-environment*.

Since both man’s worldhood and animal’s environmentality have a pathic focal point, technology will have to state its environmental characterisation on a pathic level. In its systemic version – i.e., a totalised and totalitarian version –, technology demands that man must adapt completely and, in order to achieve this, it inhibits his original pathos (*thaumazein/theorein*), by replacing it with an artificial captivation, which assimilates him to an animal condition. So *the main outcome of technological neoenvironmentality involves the feralization of man*. *Ipsa facto*, this feralization amounts to a post-human threshold, because if (neo)environmentalization was accomplished, man would stop being what he authentically is: a *Weltwesen* (worldly being).

This unique artefact, that is the neoenvironmental captivation, is produced by systematically calling the man forth, and this *supraliminal* (*überschwellig*)²¹ load becomes unbearable. The world becomes *overmanned*²² and its load of *calling forth stimulations* (*Herausforderungen*)²³ can only be tolerated by man at the cost of inadvertence. That is, in a state of *apatheia*. To distance from oneself this type of world, which imposes that integral adaption existing only in the animal *milieu*, becomes impossible. The practice of de-severance is completely inhibited. Unable to carry out his ek-static tension, man finds himself involved in a forced proximity with the world, mixed with it and thus enmeshed in it, i.e., captivated.

The neo-environmental mixing between man and world happens in a deceitful way that already Ernst Jünger called the «total mobilization (*totale Mobilmachung*)»²⁴: an epochal framework in which everything

¹⁹ See: Anders 1992: 17.

²⁰ See: Anders 1992: 33.

²¹ See: Anders 2002: 262-263; Anders 1979: 47-48.

²² See: Anders 2002: 26-31.

²³ See: Heidegger 1953: 14.

²⁴ See: E. Jünger 1930.

moves, but nothing happens. This is a world without history, in which man plays the «co-historical» (*mit-geschichtlich*)²⁵ role of a mere background actor.

As a result, as soon as man reaches the maximum expression of himself as *Kulturwesen* (cultural being), he finds himself in a completely unprecedented position. Insofar as he is artificially environmentalized, the inhabitant of technosphere will find himself poor in world, exactly as animals are. Deprived of his fundamental ability to de-sever the beings – which is a necessary condition to enter in some relationship with them, letting them be “as such” –, he impoverishes himself. The crucial premise of the feralization process consists of an *ontological Pauperismus* (I take this concept from Friedrich Georg Jünger)²⁶. In the neoenvironmental cosmos man is reduced to a completely deficient condition. the *Mangel* of *Mängelwesen* (the deficiency of the deficient being) does not correspond anymore to that ontological richness, which is the pure possibility as such, rather it amounts only to shortage, defect and at last, guilt. It becomes ontological debt.

The logic of *Neoenvironmentality* as epochal phenomenon corresponds to the secularized version of a theological dialectics. Being prey of soteriological anxiety, which is no more psychological but somatic, the feralized man gives birth to a *technodicy*.

In the perspective of the megamachine, he perceives himself as an always defective gear because he is never apt to the functions he has been assigned. As some acute interpreters have noticed – Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard in addition to Anders –, the driving force of the present reality is not to be found in the production but in the consumption, or rather in the production of consumption, that is of need. Hence its *phantasmatic*, *spectacular* and *simulacritic* matrix. Reality becomes the effect of its own projection, the production of its own production and thus a reproduction, namely, an image. The age of technology is «*The Age of the World Picture*» (*Weltbild*)²⁷. «Technocosm»²⁸ is a laboratory of dreams and a factory of needs.

Seduced by the phantoms of the «sirenic world» (*sirenische Welt*)²⁹, human being commits to an everlasting attempt to redeem itself from its defectivity, perceived already as guilt, or as a disease in its secularized version. The paradoxical introjection of this imperative according to which we let ourselves be enhanced, corrected, healed (saved) from what we ourselves produced, is what Anders defines «Promethean shame», which is the result of the «Promethean gap» that marks «the asynchronicity of the human being with his world of products [...] the inability of our soul to be “up to date” with our production»³⁰.

²⁵ See: Anders 1992: 273-278.

²⁶ See: F. G. Jünger 1956: 13.

²⁷ See: Heidegger 1938.

²⁸ See: Hottois 1984.

²⁹ See: Anders 1992: 308-315.

³⁰ Anders 2002: 15-16.

The ontological Pauperismus, which is the essential cipher of the feralization process, namely of the anthropological metamorphosis (which is potentially post-human) underpinning the phenomenon of neoenvironmentality, is grounded in the defective dogma which produces the complete having-to-be-made-available of the total mobilization as homo materia.

If the Promethean gap generates the Promethean shame, which later becomes *Promethean guilt*, then in the invocation of technodicy one must root the soteriological anxiety of a *Promethean redemption* from the only mortal sin still present in the Eden of total mobilization: that is, the «obsolescence» (*Antiquiertheit*). The aspiration to achieve the condition of a possible post-humanity represents the other side of the coin of obsolescence. Rather than reforming the world to meet human needs, it has been chosen to modify man so that he can measure up to a measure-less (overmanned) world.

Given such a premise, the human type, which is selected by the technological neoenvironment, will not be a “simple” *Übermensch*, but a real *Superman*, a post-human subject, namely: “a-no-longer-only-man”. He is who overcomes the somatic bond expanding it beyond its limits. While breaking the somatic chain used to be the purpose in the past, now the new duty is to extend it (enhance it) indefinitely. The peak, reached by the totalitarian impulse of neoenvironment, corresponds to the growth of bad conscience inside man, which will later become Promethean guilt for being “still only men”. Hence, the following attempt “to stop being (simply) human”. *The obsolescence is therefore «man’s negative attitude towards his being human»*. His *voluptas* for becoming, at last, «sicut machinae»³¹.

In its ambition to *redefine the anthropic perimeter*, technology represents here and now a concrete threat to human dignity.

3. Conclusions

The worldhood, which is the centre of gravity of the anthropic perimeter, grounds itself on the pathic presupposition of *thaumazein/theorein*. Technology becomes the present worldview insofar as it undermines this pathic presupposition, transforming it in a product. At that point, the contemplation becomes complete circumspection and thus functionally alike to the typical pathos of animality, which is captivity. When technology manages to dictate this pseudo-captivity to man, it becomes what the environment is for the animal: it demands a complete and immediate adaptation. As a consequence, while technology becomes environment, on the other side man accomplishes his feralization.

I defined man as a worldly being (*Weltwesen*), insofar as he is *able* (potentially) to be affected by that fundamental pathos (*thaumazein/theorein*), through which he can experience the cosmological difference between world and human world. The potential aspect of this pathos is such that it can be referred at

³¹ Anders 1992: 292.

least partly to the free human responsibility. “Being human” means also “becoming human” and staying as such. As Helmuth Plessner stated, *Hominitas* is not yet *humanitas*³². The fulfilment of our *Bestimmung* (determination and destination) involves an obligation and a duty, in which also the possibility of failure is included. In such a situation, which is the one that has been outlined so far, there would be the absurd outcome of having a “*conditio post-humana*” (posthuman condition) entirely identical to the animal one, i.e. man would become unrecognizable to his own eyes. As a result, the post-human subject that is completely adapted to the technological neoenvironment will correspond to the thoroughly rationalised man (“the integral rational agent”), who cannot leave his instrumental vital circle because he is enmeshed in it, that is, captivated.

In the age of fulfilled secularization, the duty of determining ourselves is entirely our responsibility. Paradoxically, the real *hybris* of the current technolatri is such not because it is too much, rather it is too little, namely, it is an insatiable will to delegate. So the real definition of the age of technology is not «Wille zur Macht» («Will to power»), but unmentionably *Wille zum Gemacht*, («Will to be made») or, as previously said: «*man’s negative attitude towards his being human*».

Despite its unceasing call to action, the spirit of the present technolatri seems to promote a *regressus ad hominitatem*, a downgrading from *humanitas* to *hominitas* with its blind commitment to technology, letting us be manipulated by it *ad libitum*. All this is accompanied by the naïve soteriological hope that what technology “wants” will be necessarily our own good.

The fact that humanity is always the outcome of a never-ending historical process and not an atemporal datum does not make it unworthy of defence and safeguard. Waiting and seeing what will happen to us, would be a legitimate conduct within a fideistic and creationist context, but not certainly at the peak of the *secular age*.

The actual neoenvironmental (post-human) arrogance consists of its pretension that it can release us from the load that we ourselves are. Instead, what our age urgently requires is that we really take on the responsibility to ourselves, by addressing now our future condition, since what we will be depends mostly on what we will choose to be. Keeping in mind, while making this choice, that nowadays as always the authentic dignity of our condition does not only consist in becoming “what we have not been yet”, but in our capability to recognize and safeguard “what we can worthily continue being”.

(translated from Italian by Davide Monaco)

³² See: Plessner 1956.

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