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## FRANCESCA FERRANDO'S VISION OF PHILOSOPHICAL POSTHUMANISM

**Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, London–New York–Oxford–New Delhi–Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, ss. 271**

Francesca Ferrando's book *Philosophical Posthumanism*<sup>1</sup> does not comprise exactly what the title suggest. It is much more than that—it is a concise and very interesting compendium, full of the most current problems concerning of what philosophy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is. It is a scientific work and, at the same time, a textbook for contemporary philosophy. I would describe this work a few others titles, like: *Philosophy after the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, *Post-Philosophy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, *Lectures on Planetary Humanities*, *Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy*.

This book is extremely important because there have been many misunderstandings about the term posthumanism and about how much it is related and how much it overlaps with another extremely popular term—transhuman-

ism. And it is not a simple task, because, as Google's browser shows, there are 535,000 links to this word. The academic text viewer (Academia.edu) has recently responded to this slogan with 14,640 folders. Transhumanism, on the other hand, can be proud of its numbers: 18,800,000 (Google) and 80,100 (Academia). Still in 2018, Matthew E. Gladden, in the fragment from his work, said that "the term 'posthumanism' has been employed to describe a diverse array of phenomena ranging from academic disciplines and artistic movements to political advocacy campaigns and the development of commercial technologies. Such phenomena differ widely in their subject matter purpose, and methodology, raising the question of whether it is possible to fashion a coherent definition of posthumanism that encompasses all phenomena thus labeled".<sup>2</sup> Besides, post-

<sup>1</sup> F. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, London–New York–Oxford–New Delhi–Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> M.E. Gladden, *Sapient Circuits and Digitalized Flesh: The Organization as Locus of Techno-*

humanist thinkers themselves are guilty of many misunderstandings, because as R. Ranish and S.L. Sorgner write, having much in common with the ideas of transhumanism, posthumans thinkers do not parish to show the differences in the initial premises (as Ferrando perfectly showed), although they have always refrained from transhumanist technofiles and faith in the end of a man as we know him.<sup>3</sup> Today, after the release of Ferrando's work, one can say that for anyone who reads it, these controversies disappear.

The book should satisfy not only a sophisticated researcher, but is also an interesting reading for someone who begins his or her adventure with the general humanities, especially the one that sets itself theoretical goals related to the post-world. During reading, such a reader does not have to constantly refer to the Encyclopedia of Philosophy. The author thoroughly explains all new or complicated concepts, all ambiguities. All related problems and their context are also taken into consideration.

This is due to the consistent writing method and the Ferrando methodology, which are reflected in the structure of the book and the way in which it is presented. The structure of the paper is based on asking questions and answering them precisely. In this context, we can say that

the paper consists of 237 questions and answers that describe the state of contemporary philosophy (we are talking about philosophy because it is so in the title of the paper, but we can also say that it is a work generally in the field of humanities). This fact is emphasized in R. Braidotti's preface, when she says that Ferrando engaged in her research philosophy, film, television and media studies, gender study, postcolonial study, cultural studies, and in addition, she is able to move efficiently in the subject of technology, cosmology and physics (interpretation of the theory of strings and its significance for the concept of multiversum in the context of Ferrando, pp. 166–169).

The beginning of the work is the most accurate and precise (the author reaches the limit of accuracy here) presentation of what will be the subject of the following sections and chapters. This initial presentation of intricate paths and problems, as well as the questions she had to answer in this book is entitled: *Navigational Tool: A Glossary of Questions*. This is not a mere notification—Ferrando precisely follows the plan presented in the *Navigational Tool* throughout the book. As it has been said already, 237 questions are answered throughout the course of book. Thanks to this structure, and the questions, the author guides the reader through the complex material of everything that has accumulated in recent decades around the discussion of posthumanism/transhumanism, and that has more often led to misunderstandings rather than clarity. This paragraph is preceded by a 6-page introduction by Ferrando entitled “Introduction: From

*logical Posthumanization* (part: “Typology of Posthumanism”), Indianapolis: Defragmenter Media, 2018, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> See: K. LaGrandeur, “Book review: Robert Ranish and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, ed., *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*”, *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 2015 (June), vol. 25, iss. 1.

Human to Posthuman”. One might think that this is a mistake because in these two fragments Ferrando discovers all her advantages, the whole workshop of the researcher. This is a detailed plan in which she describes in detail the paths she followed in order to undertake theoretical struggles. For those who are better informed in the subject matter it may seem sufficient, as it is an outline of the whole work (this is what students dream about). Partly that’s right—we get an extensive cognitive panorama of the problem, but on the other hand it’s an advantage that hardly any author is able to present for the reader a huge rang of problems connected to the set of category named as posthumanism/transhumanism and others. After all, Ferrando’s proposal not only has a theoretical dimension—philosophical posthumanism appears as an attempt to integrate the main problems of life and reflection. Ferrando herself says this, stressing at every stage of work that philosophical posthumanism is philosophy and practice.

When I started reading a book after it was send by the publishing house, I showed a few paragraphs to my assistant (PhD student), who has finalized his PhD thesis. Just like me, he was fascinated by the clarity of form and content and how much the text reflects the methodology of Ferrando’s work. We were surprised by the ease of reading the book, which is very rare for scientific work, especially in our Eastern European scientific community (teutonic style is definitely triumphant in our country). If I had seen a similar scientific text before, I would definitely recommend it to my student. But whether he live up to task or

not, the task, will be completely dependent on his idea of who an experienced and mature researcher is, and his consciousness of what he is doing.

The book is very modern not only for its content but also for its form. Reserved in accordance with the “question-answer” scheme, it perfectly fits into the contemporary mentality, for which the game is the foundation of its functioning. Therefore, in a sense it can be read from any direction, just like the famous *Hopscotch* (in Spanish: *Rayuela*), a novel by Argentine writer Julio Cortázar. At the same time, the spirit of philosophy as such does not disappear from work, because the questions Ferrando poses are very interesting in themselves, sometimes even fundamental, as in the case: “How can we exist, as posthumanists? What is matter? Are robots nonhuman persons? What is human enhancement? How can Nietzsche be relevant in our everyday life? Will humans evolve into different species?” Who wouldn’t want to know?

As has already been said, the book not only touches upon the most important problems of the contemporary man. However, in the context of Ferrando’s work, the term “problems of contemporary man” cannot be used anymore, because this work, as well as the whole posthumanism, abolishes the hegemonic discourse and dominating practices of the “hitherto” man. Therefore, it is about the most important problems of the contemporary world, civilization and culture dominated by man-made technology.

In any case, this is in line with the main premise of the book; in the first sentence, Ferrando confirms this with

full conviction: “Posthumanism is the philosophy of our time” (p. 1).

Only a year ago we were not conscious/we did not realize how important this work is, how current its problem are. One of the reasons is that the notion of anthropocene, which is also one of the most important here, describes the condition of the world shaped according to the hegemonic position of humankind in relation to nature. Today it is widely known that in order to survive, to have any chance of surviving and life in any of a post-world, to survive even a climate crisis, man must radically change his relations with the environment in which he lives. This is perfectly illustrated by the latest dramatic report of the IPCC. It shows the image of a degraded Earth. Climate change may lead to food shortages, increase human migration and fuel conflicts and war, warns the IPCC.<sup>4</sup>

This is not possible without a total departure from the existing discourses, practices and consciousness. In this sense, Ferrando’s reference to G. Agamben’s reflections about relevance of the origin of the category of life. Well, Agamben analyses the Greek sources of the terms *bios* and *zoē*, and states: “*Zoē* is common to all living being, including animals, men or gods, and it can be defined as ‘bare life’” (Ferrando, p. 110). The affinity with R. Braidotti’s reflection from her work *The Posthuman* (Polish edition: *Po człowieku*) is also clearly visible here. Braidotti postulates building a new humanistic approach to the challenges of the contemporary world (which the changing climate is an expression

of). She writes: “It follows that humanities in the post-human age of anthropocene should not remain with Human—let alone Man—as the proper subject of study. On the contrary, this field would benefit from freeing itself from the reign of the humanistic empire. It would also do well to adopt a post-anthropocentric perspective on the issues of importance to the entire planet, such as scientific and technological development, ecological and social balance, and the multiple challenges of globalization”.<sup>5</sup> In her introductory (*Preface: The Posthuman as Exuberant Excess*) to the Ferrando’s book, Braidotti highlights this aspect of the book: all humanities must be involved in order to formulate a planetary perspective. One could therefore say that the Ferrando project is about creating a planetary humanities in which man is only an element of a larger whole, but unfortunately a component that, as we already know, has a great power of destruction. And if civilisation continues to function in its current paradigm and form, we must be afraid. This does not mean, however, that Ferrando’s work has some sort of Cassandra dimension. Fortunately, it does not. Here we have the deliberations that are scientific in nature, well argued and, as has already been said, touching upon the most important problems of modern times. At the same time, the book is extremely optimistic, because it reveals the committed spirit of the author, who is convinced of the openness of man and the possibility of mak-

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/srccl/>.

<sup>5</sup> R. Braidotti, *Po człowieku*, transl. by J. Bednarek, A. Kowalczyk, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2013, p. 321.

ing changes. Isn't that the true role of philosophy and the role of an authentic thinker? After all, this is what K. Marks meant in his famous thesis about Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it".

The unchanging value of the Ferrando's book is that it ends the debate between transhumanism and posthumanism, proving to be a victory for critical and open philosophy. And although it is a work about everything that is beyond human, one can shyly say that it is Ferrando's appeal to man to go beyond himself, in the name of true humanity, to become a cosmic man/posthuman. In this sense Neil Badmington is right, who says that the rumours about the death of a human being are premature because humanism has the ability to regenerate and re-invent.<sup>6</sup>

One thing is certain: the old humanism must be buried. From this perspective, one could say that transhumanism is already an inheritor of classical humanism, although that last one is holding on. After all, it is a direct extension of the Enlightenment's idea of man and reason. And even if transhumanism pretended to be a philosophy, it was/is above all an intellectual movement and ideology. Of course, without axiology, without myth there can be no philosophy, but in the case of transhumanism, philosophical rationality was dominated and covered by the Enlightenment myth. Maybe it is a consequence of the necessity of func-

tioning of these ideas on many levels with a strong deviation towards business. And, as we all know, business and marketing always need bearing ideologies (of which R. Kurzweil seems to be a perfect example). Ferrando writes about the origins of transhumanism, its flaws and modern condition in paragraphs 4–7. The uniqueness of posthumanism lies in the fact that by not getting rid of humanism (in the most simple and customary sense), it is able to remain faithful to the premises and scientific and philosophical accuracy of the dispute and deliberations, and not to succumb to the Enlightenment myths. It seems that Ferrando in her empathy for all existence at the sign of nonhuman still is the best image of humanism in such an understanding. Posthumanism generally is more academic, philosophical and scientific, and the vision proposed by Francesca Ferrando is the best manifestation of this. The author is well aware of this when she writes: "From a philosophical posthumanist perspective based on mediation, we can interpret Posthumanism as both a reflection on what has been omitted from the notion of the human and a speculation about the possible developments of the human species" (p. 23).

As was mentioned before, a book can also be treated as a textbook. When the author invokes and discusses certain concepts, she can explain them in a very illustrative way. This is a great advantage of this book, after all, it has been known for a long time that philosophical considerations are often treated with fear by potential readers. This certainly does not apply to this work. Take the chapter entitled "Posthumanist Technolo-

<sup>6</sup> N. Badmington, "Theorizing Posthumanism", *Cultural Critique* 2003 (Winter), no. 53: *Posthumanism*, p. 11.

gies as Ways of Revealing”, in which the author refers to M. Heidegger’s concept of technology. Here she uses the image of a sculptor working on a piece of marble. Potentially, many things can come out of it, but when the technological process of turning is completed, only one of the many possibilities is realized. Ferrando also refers to *Wally-E* (USA, 2008), which shows the people of the future as obese, with short arms and legs. This may be used to illustrate the numbers of unforeseen and unintended ways how technology influenced humankind (pp. 42–43).

Ferrando follows in the footsteps of D. Haraway and R. Braidotti. She writes about the relevancy of D. Haraway’s considerations showing the lack of stability in reference to the notion of man, and that in made necessary a study of issue of hybridity (p. 26). However, when she defines posthumanism, it is close to what R. Braidotti writes in the introduction to the Ferrando’s book by emphasizing the same important points: I have defined the posthuman as a convergence phenomenon between post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism, that is to say, the critique of the universal ideal of the Man of reason on the one hand and the rejection of species supremacy on the other (p. 11). As if in the declarations of two voices, on page 60 Ferrando states: Posthumanism can be defined as a post-anthropocentrism, as a post-humanism, and as a post-dualism. The first two terms, that is, post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism, have been emphasized clearly in the formation of Philosophical Posthumanism; we have analyzed some of their genealogical references and dis-

cussed their contributions and limits. What about post-dualism? The third term of reference, post-dualism, has not been engaged fully and needs a deeper inquiry.

Another value of this work is that it may be a starting methodological paradigm for many detailed and concrete studies of a huge sphere widely defined as everything what has posthuman characteristic. For me, for example, when I try to analyze the phenomenon of post-human eroticism, Ferrando’s tips are extremely valuable, as we can embark on an extraordinary theoretical journey through the world of possible sexes, erotic relations and hybrid transgender relationships—both in the sphere of cultural imaginarium, as in the sphere of real social life.

Anthony Giddens already spoke of postmodern intimacy and eroticism, which are expressed in the figure of pure relation.<sup>7</sup> These circumstances create premises for post-enthusiasm, for post-erotic pleasure in post-world. However, we can ask what would be the essence of mutual giving of pleasure. It is an expression of the evolution of the process of individualization, which has led to the total emancipation of the individual, who, in erotic matters functions on the border of absolute freedom. Posthumanism shows how the traditional understanding of human nature dissolves, and each human being becomes the “Other”. Ferrando shows what are the possible conditions for the encounter

<sup>7</sup> A. Giddens, *Przemiany intymności. Seksualność, miłość i erotyzm we współczesnych społeczeństwach*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2006, p. 81.

with the various figures of the post-humanistic “Other”.

This aspect is also strongly emphasized by R. Braidotti’s in Preface: “Furthermore, Ferrando’s multispecies discursive universe invites us to rethink sexuality without and beyond genders, starting from a vitalist return to the polymorphous and perverse structure of human and nonhuman sexuality” (p. 15).

Paradoxically, such cases of “post-humanistic” erotic relations are already known today. At the 9<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale, a video by Ingo Niermann and Alex Karolinski *Army of Love* (2016) was presented. The video is an account of erotic sessions during which young volunteers enter into erotic relations with disabled people of different ages. The authors state a growing demand for erotic intimacy and postulate that only its emancipation from the rigour of attractiveness will allow to fairly satisfy the erotic needs of people in the world, which is the foundation of happiness and mental health. This new approach does not mean a new humanistic essentialism. On the contrary, the extension of erotic love to beings that are above all characterized as Others who do not meet our customary standards is only the first step towards a completely unrestricted desire and gender, also through a species barrier.

Posthumanistic reflection on the gender determinants of human functioning raises the issue of erotic identity in a different way. As Ferrando says, man is not an autonomous subject, but is located in a vast system of mutual relations. What is a threat to traditional, hegemonic humanities is a blessing for a new understanding of existence that can follow

after human. Gender diversity and pluralism have a positive influence on the diversification and deepening of human sensitivity related to eroticism and sexuality, and therefore they even positively deepen existence. Rather, they promote the processes of human empowerment and individualisation. Traditional approach was too arbitrary, without any justification, referring to the ideologically defined nature of man. For example, when it comes to gender dimorphism, it may be completely different than one would think—it will only be artificially supported for reproductive purposes.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the other question is whether it will be needed at all for post-human beings, freed from the necessity of biological reproduction.

Slavoj Žižek talked about a similar problem and perfectly emphasizes the posthumanistic, importance of this issue, not transhumanistic, how a lot of thinkers may seem. Of course, as often in the case of this author, it is not devoid of a certain ambiguity and ridicule. He analyzed the hypothetical situation of humanity (2040) in M. Houellebecq’s novel *Atomised*. In order to avoid impasse and conflicts arising from sexual passions, the human species is genetically transformed into humanoids devoid of sexual needs. This new, post-human genre is a bit like a Foucault’s man as a multiplied Self, who can enjoy himself painlessly, in an unlimited way, because there are no traditionally expressed pas-

<sup>8</sup> S. Žižek, “Zadnego seksu! To jest posthumanizm”, *Przegląd Filozoficzno-Literacki* 2009, no. 1, s. 41–52.

sions behind them—because they are detached from the Self.

The above comments on a very specific problem do not, of course, aim at presenting the problem exhaustively. They only demonstrate that Ferrando's book is methodologically and empirically inspiring in every respect.

Ferrando's vision of philosophical posthumanism clearly puts the caesura between yesterday's, we can say, hard-headed (and as we have already known very dangerous for the planet) humanism and open, critical posthumanism.

The whole spirit of the philosophy of posthumanism and philosophy of Francesca Ferrando is contained in the invocation to the book: *To us, human and posthuman beings. To existence.*

I can only repeat after the author: this is a book for us, for human and posthuman readers. If you want to live in a world that's not going to fall, you should read it and apply it.

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