Rethinking the Human Condition in the Present
Chances for a Humanistic Alternative to Technics' Dehumanization

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There is a question, the most radical one, that inquires philosophy of education today. It's a question about the contemporary human being, about his condition, about the sense and nonsense of his living and existing. The human being of our age, though, lives in a globalized world, mastered by technics and economical reason, as well as functionalism conveyed by the latter. The human being himself has been transformed into a function - a human who, in accordance to the neoliberal thought, finds in personal advantage, profit and consumption, their sole interests, in a world tending to cancel the differences and raise homogenisation and conformism. A world that condemns the human being to exercise a function and not merely to exist; all of these factors submerge the human in a whirl of senselessness and make him oblivious of himself.

These dehumanization processes, however, bring the need of an increase of awareness on the part of philosophy of education into play. Something which can only originate from a thought mirroring the complexity of reality, a critic, reflexive and meta-reflexive thought, also mirroring the responsibility of still commit to the human being and take the chance of a humanistic alternative, something that can only result from a formation able to move beyond the dominating technical thought and towards an education that forms by thinking and thinks by forming.

Keywords: Dehumanization, Complexity, Technics, Formation, Critical Reflexiveness.

Ripensare la condizione umana nel presente. Possibilità per un'alternativa umanistica alla disumanizzazione della tecnica

C'è una domanda, la più radicale, che interroga oggi la filosofia dell'educazione. Si tratta della domanda sull'uomo nella contemporaneità, sulla sua condizione, sul senso e non senso del suo vivere e del suo esistere. Ma l'uomo d'oggi vive in un mondo globalizzato, dominato dalla tecnica e dalla ragione economica, dal funzionalismo che essa veicola e che ha trasformato l'uomo stesso in funzione, un uomo che il pensiero neoliberale vuole interessato solo al tornaconto individuale al guadagno e al consumo, un mondo che tende ad annullare le differenze e crea omologazione e conformismo, che chiede all'uomo di funzionare e non di esistere, fattori tutti che lo rendono dimentico di sé stesso e immerso nel vortice dell'assenza di senso. Ma questi processi di disumanizzazione chiamano proprio la filosofia dell'educazione ad una presa di consapevolezza, che può venire solo da un pensiero che rispecchi la complessità della realtà, che sia critico, riflessivo e meta-riflessivo e alla responsabilità di scommettere ancora sull'uomo, sui margini per un'alternativa umanistica che può venire solo da una formazione che sia in grado di andare oltre il pensiero tecnico dominante e verso un'educazione che pensando forma e formando pensa.

Parole-chiave: disumanizzazione, complessità, tecnica, formazione, riflessività critica.

There is a question, the most radical one, that inquires, generally, philosophy today – if we assume that in philosophy's reflection the people's spirit and the problems that upset their lives are mirrored– and it inquires, in particular, philosophy of education. It is the question about the contemporary human being, about his condition, about the sense and nonsense of his living and his existing, about whether he does or he does not belong to the essence of *humanitas*, that can't be separated from the essence of *Bildung*, seen as the propensity and care for "accomplishing what somehow someone already is"[1], which implies the capacity of thinking, of acting, of designing and designing oneself autonomously, of belonging to a productive and not merely repro-

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[1] This is our free interpretation of what the Author states in the *incipit*, in Heidegger (1987, p. 267), which, although, corresponds to what he claims in other writings on *Bildung*.

ductive way , to a world, a society, a culture, a tradition, and in the same time, of belonging to oneself.

The contemporary human being, although, lives in a globalized world, dominated by the technics and the economical reason, that underlies and maintains it, by the functionalism generated by it and that changed the human himself into function, inhibiting a critically oriented thought and action. A human who, in accordance to the neoliberal thought, finds in personal advantage, profit and consumption, his sole interests and whose rule is the maximization of the individuals' egoistic interest. If we consider, furthermore, that the market has become the only ruler of public life, artificially producing needs and making a consumer out of the man, up to the point that he ends up consuming himself, in the furious race to possess objects, the only ones supposed to stabilize his identity, since they don't set relational issues, a race towards gaining and success, towards competition, as sole relational form, all of these factors make the human oblivious of himself and submerge him in a whirl of senselessness.

If all what has been mentioned has, unavoidably, strongly contributed in activating dehumanization processes, in removing the differences, due to a worrying trend for homologation and conformism, if we are faced with an epochal change that has caused the crisis of all historical forms of humanism, yet it could be claimed that the question could be posed in terms of how to give a meaning to a new, if particular, humanism.

But supposing that it could make sense to speak, today, of a new humanism, beyond the trans- and the post-humanisms, then, it should be necessary to humbly ask oneself what is human, the human's authentic essence, his original condition, his potentialities and also his boundaries, his conditionings, weaknesses and fragilities. Only this way it is possible to inquire about the contemporary human and to understand if, after what stated in the *incipit* of this writing upon the ongoing dehumanization processes, there are chances for a humanistic alternative, essentially consisting of ensuring that the human be not an instrument of technics anymore but be able to coexist with critical sense with it and to "colonize" it through his thought and his knowledge, through education, returning the human to himself, to his original condition. A condition in which he changes depending on reality, on the world that surrounds him, on the education he receives, but in which, in the meantime, he maintains the original characters complying with his essence.

There is no doubt that a typical feature of the human is his existing, that is to say his being aware of himself and the world that surrounds him; and another is his original fragility, bound, above all, to his finitude and the consciousness of his caducity, but also to this being unaccomplished, that brings him to live his life in search of his own form; a form that is given and built as well, mainly because of his thrownness, a condition he is called to transcend through the care and the project.

As we already saw, givenness and construction are expressed by Heidegger in reference to *Bildung*.

"We are – as Pareyson will claim – personal executions of a common to every human universality" (Pareyson, 1960, p. 269).

But to say that we are "personal executions of a common universality" means to claim that everyone of us interprets in a unique and singular way something that is ontologically given, namely, the universal form of *humanitas*. Being an unaccomplished, uncompleted form, but originally belonging to the human person and giving oneself a form during all his lifespan, in touch with the other human being and with the world, represent two aspects of what is to be considered the original destination of the human being. As already said, however, the human is into the path of his life and into the process of his formation, fully exposed to the risk of losing himself in the thousand ways of Kierkegaard's "terrible" (Kierkegaard, 1953, pp. 138-139), i. e., of failing the existence, of living without existing, of experiencing pain and fear of death; and this is the tragic, the negative trait that belongs to the human, since it is part of life, but it doesn't find room in the world created by the contemporary human, who has removed and deleted it, in the name of the conviction that everything is possible, that there are no boundaries but only borders; the human in his authenticity, is, on the contrary, consciousness, not only of his life's but also of his knowledge's boundary, he is option for the possible, never for the certain. But if the human is at the highest exposed and fragile, even since he is unaccomplished, neotenic, indigent, "creature of the need", he needs cares and the chance to fulfil himself as authentically human, on the basis of his very own possibilities[2], he depends precisely on the Care, as ontologically understood and grounding the concrete, human care activities and relationships.

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[2] The reference to the ontological nature of the care points evidently out to Heidegger and can be found in Heidegger (1969, p. 289).

Concerning fragility as main human feature, Gehlen will speak about "biological deficiency" (Gehlen, 1983, p. 167), while Lévinas will state that "the human, from tip to toe, all the way to the bone marrows, is vulnerability" (Lévinas, 1985, p. 127).

Hard not to think of what is, maybe not by chance, one of the most well-known Pascal's *Thoughts*, in which the human is compared to a cane, "the nature's most fragile, a vapor, a drop of water are enough to kill him, but his nobility and superiority, upon the universe that can squash him, lays in the fact that he thinks and he knows he has to die" (Pascal, 1967, pp. 160-163).

Pascal suggests here that the thinking and continuous questioning the sense of life is part of the human's essence, his original feature, starting from the awareness, that is solely human, of the death. But there are endless ways of thinking and it needs to be questioned which might be the highest form of it and might be characterizing the human being at the most.

Agreed upon the fact that the methodical and calculating science's way of thinking is certainly dominating today, it needs to be questioned whether there are or aren't other forms of thinking that are complementary or alternative to it. Certainly, as Heidegger states, the thought in his highest form can't be aimed at the useful and at the application, it can't be reduced to technical thought, that serves the doing and the producing, a way of thinking that mostly fits the science and that sometimes has brought philosophy (and also philosophy of education) to justify their presence assuming science-status, but this means, adds Heidegger, "the abandon of the thinking's very essence" (Heidegger, 1987, p. 268).

The thought that intends to seek the truth stays in its essence when it is in the critics, that unmethodical modus, i. e. not appeased by the appliance of an a priori established method, but rather unquiet, and therefore characterized by an unexhausted questioning, that does not elude the radical questions that will never find secure answers, a thought that is doubt and skepsis, that is look on reality in seek of a truth and a meaning that doesn't tend to simplify or to "specialize", or fragment, but to seize reality in its irreducible complexity, being, therefore, reflective and meditative, more than calculating-scientific thinking.

To think is not, how it is usually believed today, to know, if superficially, many things, especially through the help of the powerful informatic means, that, indeed, inform but don't trigger the thinking; the truth isn't accessible

to the ones who know many things, but to them, instead, who are able to make a good use of the thought. As Heraclitus polemically said: "Knowing many things does not teach to have intelligence" (Fragment 40).

In fact, right at the beginning of the third millennium, the human shows an exceptional intellectual blindness, inherited from the XX century culture, that, with its amazing technical-scientific progresses has, although, conveyed – through the reductionist method, that teaches to decontextualize, disjoint and disarticulate the knowledges, up until the drift of hyper-specialism – an extraordinary insensitiveness towards global and complex issues.

So writes Edgar Morin:

> The XX century has lived under the domination of a rationality that has pretended to be the sole rationality, but that has wasted the understanding, the reflexion and the long-term view. Its insufficiency in facing the heaviest problems, has represented one of the most serious issues for humanity (Morin, 2001, p. 46).

A. Gorz, on his part, denounces that the mathematical formalization ends up making of the thought itself a technique. He points out on the common roots of the economical rationality and the way of thinking that he defines "cognitive-instrumental reason" and that is based upon the logical-formal thought.

The deepening of this connection would be bringing us too far, but it is important to highlight, for its implications for the human, that the mathematical formalization of the thought, codified in technical procedures, prevents him from every chance of returning reflectively on himself and isolates him from the knowledges that are provided by the living experience.

> The technicalization, the reification, the monetarizing of the relationships have their cultural anchoring in this technics of thinking, in which the operations work without the involvement of the subject and the subjects, who, being absent, neither are accountable. That way can take shape our cold civilization, whose cold, functional, calculated, formalized relationships estrange the living individuals from the reified world that is, nonetheless, their product; a civilization in which a terrific technical inventiveness goes along with a degradation of the art of living, of communication ability and of spontaneity (Gorz, 1992, p. 140).

This calculating thinking culminates in visualizing the human himself, his brain, his mind, on the basis of the machine's model, up until the appearing of this thinking machine that is the computer and, from there on, all informatic, technological systems that the technics has produced, and that have undoubtedly brought advantages but have also, actually, substituted the free and non-calculating thought and have ended up becoming a real world for the contemporary human, have created a virtual reality exchanging it for the authentical one, inhibiting the relationships between humans again through virtual relationships, depriving the man of the authentical experiences that originate from the real and lived life to substitute them with fake experiences, all inside the virtual reality.

> The mind, having become able to think like a machine, recognizes itself in a machine, that works alike, unaware of the fact that, in the truth, the machine doesn't work like the mind, but only like the mind that has learned to work as a machine (*ivi*, p. 139).

The human brain is more and more often compared to a Turing Machine, able to process an enormous quantity of data and to "draw conclusions" starting from the use of algorithms and of the embodied program, namely the *software*. But the human brain is something else and it can never be thought of, not even from the biological and scientific perspective, as a simple "external memory", independent form the body that hosts it; the brain has been sculptured, along with the body, by life, by our history, by the joys and the pain that have made us become what we are and it can never be thought of as a simple elaborator of informations, as complex and important they might be, on the contrary, the excess of codified data, lacking of direct experience and the disconnection of brain and body are creating a veritable distance between the human and the world and the man and himself[3].

It is easy to identify in the ruling on part of the economical reason an aspect of the broader domination of the technics. And with the term "technics" it is not just to be intended the universe of the means (the technologies) that as a whole compose the technical device, but also and especially so, the rationality that presides to their use in terms of functionality and efficiency.

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[3] Upon the topic of the human compared to the machine and the thinking that can't be detached from the body, from the living body, can be seen Benasayag (2015, *passim*).

Technics arose with these features not as an expression of the human "spirit", but as a "remedy" to his biological shortage.

Quoting A. Gehlen and other big exponents of the occidental thought, U. Galimberti dares to claim that, in a certain way, technics represents the "essence of the human" (Galimberti, 1999, p. 34), since he was born uncomplete, weak, lacking under the instinctual point of view, compared to the animal, he can live only thanks to his action, which rapidly achieves those technical procedures that supply to the human instinctual weakness and become, as a matter of fact, his way to build himself a world (*ivi*, p. 35).

But the technics, appeared as a device for the survival of the human and as an instrument of progress and of superiority towards the animal, is no more, today, something we can make use of, we inhabit it and it is impossible to walk away from it. Since we inhabit a world that is technically organized in each of its parts, technics is not an object of our choice anymore, but it is our surrounding, in which goals and means, aims and conceptions, behaviours, thoughts, actions and passions, even dreams and desires are technically articulated and need technics to express themselves. Through its means (technologies), through its rationality, based upon the concepts of functionalism, efficiency and performance, technics represents the unescapable destination of our occidental world.

What happened, although, to the human in a universe of means that has nothing else ahead but the enhancement and strengthening of its equipment?

> There where the world of life – writes again Galimberti – is entirely generated and made possible by the technical setup, the human becomes an executive of said setup and his identity resolves itself in its functionality; it is, therefore, possible to say that in the era of technics the human is by-himself inasmuch as he is functional to his other self that is technics" (*ivi*, p. 41).

Arisen as a condition of the human existence, thus as an expression of its anthropological nature, today, because of the dimensions it has achieved and because of the autonomy it has gained, technics expresses the abstraction and the combination of human conceptions and actions at such a high level of artificiality, that no human group, as specialized as it might be, and maybe precisely because of its specialization, is able to control it in its entirety. In

a similar context, to be reduced to an executive of the technics means, so, for the human, to be "elsewhere" in regard to the home he has historically known, it means to be far from himself.

The technics has constituted, for centuries, a means to realize certain goals, but since it has increased in its quantity to the point of becoming available for the realization of each and every aim, then, it is not the aim anymore, that conditions the representation, the research, the acquiring of technical instruments, but it will be the increased availability of the technical means that will spread the range of each and every aim; therefore, the technics turns from instrument into aim, not because it proposes itself something, but because every goal and aim that the humans propose themselves can't be achieved but through the mediation of technics.

Another characteristic feature of our society and our world, that affects also pedagogic research and its repercussions on the school field, is the assuming of a performance-oriented perspective, which, as Benasayag warns, is, nowadays, often aimed at nothing but the performance itself, in other words, one should be performative for the performance (*ibidem*), without a wider horizon, without a sense, without a structure, without other aims, and this distorted efficiency, this functionalism that harms the existence, is a typical feature of the technics' era.

"The society's proposal to the youth, is to *function*. Not to exist but to function, namely, to be performative" (Benasayag, 2019b, p. 25).

The imperative of always having to function, of always having to be performative, keeps the contemporary human from showing his own fragility, it keeps him, therefore, from being authentically himself, in his integrity of body and mind. Who is fragile as, for example, the old people, has to be pushed aside, as not being performative anymore and the same can be said for any kind of fragility, with the consequences that can easily be figured out.

It must be said that school and university, through the introduction of continuous evaluation and self-evaluation processes, that are carried out exclusively on a quantity and not on a quality basis, since this is the condition for being considered objective and scientific, take towards this direction.

The competence-based pedagogy, in order to be able to evaluate through measuring, removes from school everything that is real culture, everything that is creativity (there is no more writing of essays – not easily measurable – but there's measuring of language competencies), a school that doesn't form for life, that doesn't teach critical attitude, doesn't transmit culture, but that

in-forms, in which the passion for the taught contents transmitted to the students is lacking, while only this kind of passion would be able to join and "infect" them, a school that does not pay attention to the specificity and uniqueness of every individual and doesn't promote his development, doesn't permit to show fragilities, since they decrease productivity, that doesn't educate the/to emotions that are the womb of knowledges and, often, leaves room to the, sometimes violent, impulses that are dominating in the anonymousness of the social media, that should have been, indeed, translated into emotions and educated as such.

"You will be educated – writes furthermore Benasayag – when you will have learned to suffocate the personal inclinations and affinities, to erase everything that could disturb or stop the fluidity that is requested in the job market, when you will be, that is to say, well disintegrated (2019a, pp. 15-16).

Flexibility, plasticity, adaptability, are the new mantra against every slightly more complex thought: everyone is requested, since childhood, to evolve into a hyperplastic un-form.

And this happens even in the very places that should guide the formation processes of individuals in the age of development, when stronger is the struggle of the self-seeking in a world that continuously brings them far from themselves and of a search of a, yet not stable nor fix, identity; when youth pose themselves radical questions upon the sense and nonsense of their way of being in the world, upon their being born and dying, upon the pain and the suffering, upon friendship and love, where they should live experiences and searches that aren't reducible to a mere data collection. A walk of life is something very different than a curriculum that lists the activities in which an individual is performative.

The domination of technics is, therefore, an epochal turn and if it turns out to be impossible to dominate it or to not depend on it, nothing else remains to the human but the hope and also the engagement of becoming aware of it, of thinking of it with "another" thought but the technical one, a complex thought, not specialized or shattered, a thought that doesn't blind, as the science's one, but does penetrate, as Zambrano (1996, p. 75) suggests, in order to avoid that the technics happen without his knowing, that it act without his knowing, making, like this, meaningless his own existing.

If, then, the look is set upon the world built up by the informatic technologies, it can't be overlooked that it is an unavoidable reality, from the moment that the internet has become the plot of our existences. If we consider

the digital natives, that were born after the appearing of internet, it is hard not to see how their constant use of the social networks influences inexorably and in increasingly stronger wise their way of life, of relating to the others, to look at, build and understand the world, to seek the meaning they believe they find in their world of connections, of continuous stimuli, of virtual relationships, characterized by the speed with which these are established and vanish; the meaning is given by the number of the visualizations they obtain, existing only as they appear on the social media.

But the bewildered looks of the youth at school need a sense, a simple sense of living, but too often school is not able to offer it to them, intent as it is on developing foredetermined programs and on judging and evaluating their performances. So, they will renounce walking the hard path of school and are set to remain in lonely search of a meaning all inside the amount of the social media's incitements, developing such a dependence on them that the frustration generated by the upbreaking of these incitements, will cause in them an anguished void.

The continuous use of the new technologies does, thus, profoundly affect the cognitive attitudes and of every other life's expression of the new generations. It concerns individuals that live in constant connection. They face a screen every day, from which they observe and build the world in a different way: through the screen they appear, express themselves, communicate and, therefore, establish social and affective virtual relationships. How could all this not affect their essential way of being? Television, games, tablet, computer screens, in front of which young and old humans spend increasing time, build up an irresistible force that mesmerizes them and that puts them in an almost hypnotic, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, simply absent, status.

To return to the opening question about the human condition today and also about the meaningful- or meaninglessness of a new humanism, it has to be said that very few, in the panorama in dark colours that we have tried to depict, can be seen, today, that allows us to see the signs of a humanistic alternative, that might make us hope for something opposing all the dehumanization processes that are involved in this scenario and, nonetheless, there's not much use of a way of thinking that disregards it, that isn't aware of it and that, simply, gives in to an integralist and technophobic temptation, opposing certainties and views of the human and the world that pursue impossible returns to the past, to a long-lost time; rather, there must be found ways to

live with this condition and to seek openings for the human, for a new and different sense-giving.

This is why philosophy of education can't assume merely renunciatory attitudes, on the contrary, it has to face with even more strength the task of questioning about the human, about his destiny and, aware of the epochal and global processes of dehumanization, of finding the courage to denounce these at every level and, nonetheless, still commit to the human being, not abandoning him to himself, to the inevitable lost of meaning he would be subjugated to without the (cultural, emotional, ethic, existential) mediation of a pedagogic care relationship, aimed at making it possible, for him, to return to belonging to himself, to being free for his most own possibilities, to choosing and to choosing himself, to existing and not to functioning. The ones, namely, who are hit, distorted, pushed into the whirl of the general process of under-humanization coming from utilitarism, businessification, from the imperative of being performative, are first of all the places entrusted to formation at every level, from school to university, with the drifts that have been denounced above; but it is for this very reason that, if ever some glimmer can be seen, to bring back the human to himself, to give him back his original features, to be "human and not non-human", it is precisely offered by a radical rethinking of the formation and education of the new generations, only a society that invests in formation, but a formation that makes aware of the traps of technical rationality, can nurture the hope of a future that is not determined by technics but by the human, who, despite the fact that he can't avoid depending on the technics' world, he can at least decide the way to inhabit it, in order not to be determined by technics but to become an active and not merely a reproductive part of it and to return being the place and the origin of the sense, despite a reality that deprived him of that same sense.

This, and only this, can be understood, today, as a new humanism; investing in a good formation. So, the role of pedagogy becomes crucial, a pedagogy of the human, of a human that "form himself thinking and think in forming himself"[4], and it should be taken the challenge of the engagement, the capacity, the responsibility of the ones that are teaching and educating, at every level, of promoting the critical thought and not the efficiency, not only a linear, logical and formal thought, but one able to comprehend also

[4] We pick this thought from Sola (2008, p. 11).

the incongruence, the exception, the deviation, the complexity of life, giving back room to emotions, transmitting to the new generations the passion for knowledge as only weapon against letting themselves devour by the virtual world that so overwhelmingly fascinates them but that also tends to expropriate and move them away from themselves. School, university, as formational places are, moreover, the only realities where there can still be seen openings for returning the human to himself, but it is necessary to be aware of the responsibility of that task and the awareness is once again given only by the thinking that philosophy of education cultivates and that is called to transmit to the ones educating and forming at every level, a critical and radical thinking, able to transcend the obvious, the shared, the stable frames and perspectives and that are shown as natural, in order to change perspective, to walk towards the other and the elsewhere, towards new horizons and "possible worlds" (Bateson, 1976, *passim*)[5], which implies an education to think the complexity of reality, outside and beyond the technical thought.

[5] The reference is on Bateson (1976, *passim*).

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