

# The Life Force and the Utopia of the Post-Human

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The utopia we are dealing with here could have been called ‘the mother of all utopias’ since it is in fact humanity’s greatest, most primal dream, indeed the one that defines us as human. This great utopia, from which are woven our representations of paradise, for example, is immortality, the theme of René Barjavel’s novel entitled *The Immortals* (1973).

The book’s superb initial pages at once create suspense when we see Pandit Nehru, in 1955 when he headed the government of India, in the middle of a cabinet meeting receiving a call that makes him drop everything and go immediately to meet an old Brahmin. It transpires that the old man is as knowledgeable in his scientific work to help life combat cancer as he is wise and holy in his spiritual quest for a full life brought to perfection and thus beyond the grasp of death. Later, at the end of the first half of the book, which is full of suspense and poetry, we learn that this wise scholar, doubly committed to combating death, has found the key to immortality. He decided that it should be ‘the great secret’, shared and maintained solely by the greatest heads of state in the world, who would be responsible for jealously guarding an island (utopia always has to have an island in one form or another) indicated by a simple number: 307. On this island 307, an artificial paradise if ever there was one, are kept in eternal quarantine all who have accidentally come into contact with immortality.

But it is not just about the great and good of this world and a few top scientists plotting to keep quiet about what is called in the novel ‘the greatest danger and the greatest hope for the world’. It is also a superb love story in which a woman in love, and therefore stubborn beyond all reasons of state in her quest for the happiness of being with the man she loves, overcomes all obstacles and, after 20 or so years, joins him on the island to which immortality has carried and imprisoned him. One of the novel’s high points is reached at the moment when she finds him at last, but also discovers in the mirror the couple they have become: an old woman beside the young man he has remained who so intensely revealed her to herself and to the power of life.

What makes Barjavel’s *Immortals*<sup>1</sup> the magnificent science fiction novel it is lies in the way love, which defies time (and conventions too, since the lovers are both

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married to someone else), science, which conquers sickness, and wisdom, which triumphs over death, converge in celebrating what I call the *life force*.

How can we define the life force that is the basis for the utopia of immortality? In one of the pages from the novel which the use of italics places outside the narrative scheme properly speaking and makes it a sort of 'philosophical pause' in the book, the scientific and reflective credo of the Indian sage Shri Bahanba is expressed as follows:

. . . in the kingdom of the living, death is an illogical absurdity. It seems to have been added on top of the work of life, by an accident or an alien intervention. Everything is planned by nature so that a living organism, when it attains the perfect point of development, remains like that indefinitely. But it does not remain like that. When it reaches the highest point of itself it begins, slowly, then quicker and quicker, to slide down the slope that takes it to its destruction . . . What Shri Bahanba had found was, it appeared, the way to make humans once again lords of all, just like at the moment of their creation.

There is some Spinoza in that credo. There is the idea that death is not part of life, in other words that the thought of death is not a living person's thought: the appropriate idea of oneself is to perceive oneself in a certain kind of identity, *sub quadam specie aeternitatis*. Death, and thus fear as well, do not exist because they have no place ontologically in what is already full of itself, in what Barjavel called 'the work of life'.

There is some Spinoza and there is also some Bergson, who, inspired by biology, as the poet Valéry said of him, put the living being's thinking about the *life force* at the heart of philosophy, that 'current of life' he evokes in *Creative evolution*<sup>2</sup> '[which] running through the bodies it has organized one after the other, passing from generation to generation, has been divided up between species and scattered among individuals without losing any of its power, rather getting stronger as it moved forward' (p. 26).

I would like to say, about these three ways of talking about the force and intensity of life – Barjavel, Spinoza and Bergson – which translates into the great human utopia of immortality, that they are radically opposed to what the new philosophers of the trans-human or post-human would like to put forward as a possible realization of the power of life. Here I am thinking, among others, of the book by Michel Onfray entitled *Les Féeries anatomiques*,<sup>3</sup> which in my view forces an identification that does not exist between Spinoza's plenitude of living a life beyond the grasp of death and what seems to me not to go further than a mechanic cobbling together prostheses and extensions for human existence. I think that if we want to do without any transcendence of what living is and remain on a strict 'immanence level' to make human life take advantage of extensions due to techno-science alone, the resulting individual put together by *extensions* has nothing to do with what is mentioned in terms of *intension*, intensity of life. Stating that humans are 'all-conquering', and so can conquer death, is not making them stay alive simply because they walk backwards when faced with death. The extra time provided by extensions is not perception of the self *sub quadam specie aeternitatis*. Is our post-human future more than the future of an individual cobbled together?

*Our Posthuman Future* is the title of a recent book by Francis Fukuyama,<sup>4</sup> published two years ago. The author made himself famous in the 1980s when he set himself up as a new Hegel, announcing that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of real

socialism marked the 'end of history'. In the latest book, which I have mentioned above, he in fact goes back, in his prospective vision of an era of post-humanity, on the conclusions to his previous thinking. Those conclusions were in essence that Hegel had been perfectly correct when he wrote that history ended in 1806 with Napoleon expanding the principles of the 1789 Revolution from being French into being henceforth European. Now there was strictly speaking no history anymore, nothing but detours, however long and violent they might be, round a de facto generalization of the de jure universality which those principles embodied and which was to lead to the establishment of liberal democracy everywhere. The birth and development of communism, which might have been thought to be a moment in history that would result in a different scenario, eventually turned out, according to this way of thinking, to be merely a lengthy, painful detour, dream or nightmare depending on your view, which shattered on the Berlin Wall and disappeared as it collapsed.

That philosophy of history has caused a lot of ink to flow and has been hailed on the right and condemned on the left, but today the only criticism Fukuyama wishes to highlight in the flood of reactions it provoked, and which he says is the source of his prospective thinking on post-humanity, is the following: there can be no end to history since there is no end to Science. And it is particularly because 'we seem to be right in the middle of a period of monumental advance in the life sciences' that in a way the biotechnologies are the source of 'history's new beginning', with their consequences which are in some cases foreseeable and in others unforeseeable and so all the more menacing, and also with the political decisions their development forces us to make, often in a fog of contradictory considerations. So off we go on another round of history, but a round that will be in the first instance scientific and then political only as a consequence.

Why then is this fresh start for history, which is a consequence of contemporary techno-scientific revolutions, so closely bound up with the biotechnologies? Is our era not also and equally one of the revolution in information and new techniques of communication?

Indeed, but two reasons can be put forward for especially picking out the life sciences' impact on the direction humanity's future will take.

The first is that the humans of the new information and communication technologies, *homo communicans* as we might call them, are not new, different beings. Even if we imagine them carrying around all the accessories they need so that they stay informed and 'in touch' at all times, they will be more encumbered and definitely more talkative but in no way will they be really different. It is another matter when we consider the new technological possibilities opened up by the life sciences. Jean-Jacques Salomon, reflecting on the social issues raised by the new technologies, has written:

From the moment when, by recombining DNA, we can act on the species, affect and alter the genome (cloning), we are faced with the effects – terrifying effects because they are unknown and unpredictable – of technologies dealing with the genetic structure not only of individuals but also of the species. The more we touch the living organism, the more ethics comes up against dimensions of the sacred: there is no precedent for the possible effects, which are not limited to interventions prolonging, repairing or altering the sick

body in order to allow the patient to get well or survive, but extend to the essence of the human being, not just as a person but as heir to and transmitter of the species.<sup>5</sup>

And so it is essence that is at issue and that is what is meant when there is talk of a post-human condition as our possible future.

The second reason is the consequence of the one just detailed. Because essence is at issue, the question of political, civic supervision, even in these deregulatory times, seems to arise where biotechnology is concerned. Of course information also has its legal and policing problems, but once again it is a question of improving what we are already doing not changing what we are.

This post-humanity scenario is categorized by Francis Fukuyama, so as to explore its implications better, under the heading of utopia or rather the dystopia dreamt up in 1932 by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*. So in many respects *Brave New World* seems to have mapped out in its main lines the image of a post-human future for humanity. What do those main lines consist of?

Tomorrow's world will be one of the tyranny of happiness, a happiness that would fall back on the biological foundation of the state of mind associated with the idea we commonly have of it. In the anticipatory exercise represented by *Brave New World*, we remember that the state of happiness is related first to the abolition of sickness and disorder, stress, madness, loneliness and emotional distress. There is even a ministry responsible for ensuring the gap between desire and satisfaction is reduced to the absolute minimum so that there is no room for any feeling of lack. And consequently no room for introspection, for that consciousness of the self as a desiring being which is precisely what makes humans humanity, distinguishing them from beings that feel their desire without thinking it. Today we might imagine that such a ministry's main duty would be to ensure the constant availability of psychotropic drugs, happiness pills, as Prozac has been labelled. In this regard we know how important research and publications have now become which are devoted to explaining the *biology of our passions* as humans, relating our emotions, even the most spiritual, to a biological basis which is itself capable of being chemically altered.

In antiquity the philosopher Aristotle pointed out, in his analysis of the notion of happiness, that there was a pleasure in simply feeling alive. At the beginning of our modernity Descartes, considering the machine of the body as a substance separate from the soul, thought it could be considerably improved upon and that our life expectancy was nothing compared with what it should be capable of being at the end of a programme in which medicine might have become attentive to the precepts of sound philosophy. In other words there was no reason why in this matter we should not return to the longevity of the Bible. An existence extended in that way is an important element of the idea we normally have of happiness and it is not surprising if post-humanity looks like a humanity whose progress takes it back to the era of the patriarchs. What seems to lie at the very basis of the idea of a post-humanity that would live longer, in better health and less unhappily, is that resources to extend human life, that oft visited utopia, should exist beyond what mere 'normal' medical progress enables us to achieve in terms of life expectancy. Not because that post-humanity would be better cared for but because it would use 'spare parts'. It is not surprising that those groups that see cloning as 'the good news' in the religious sense

of the term should have as their theology concepts that come straight out of science fiction.

But it is a good idea to see what logic drives those who try to reflect seriously on the progress of the species believing, as Michel Onfray does, that regulation which would have the aim of preventing the possible from being realized runs counter to the impulse, the life force that is humanity itself. The dual basis of the reasoning is obvious. First, on the ontological level, we have reached the point where in human terms the evolution of life has become aware of itself and, in order to go forward, it needs human beings to take over from natural change with their own creative powers. Then, and on the moral level, it is thought that people wrongly wish to halt evolution towards post-humanity in the name of an unidentifiable human essence. Unless we see this as the last manifestation of creationism, we have to admit that what defines humans is not a nature but an infinite malleability, a disposition to choose what they want to become, to change themselves according to their wishes, to be their own demiurge. After all, why should we weep over the old human if the tears thus shed are shed in the name of a vision of the human that is itself the product of a process of evolution over millions of years when creation's last-born hold in their perishable hands the very secret of that process? In a word, and in the language of Nietzsche, by what right would human beings judge with their categories of good and evil the superhuman who, transforming the stock of emotive responses that are humanity's because of evolution, is for that very reason beyond good and evil thus defined?

What should we reply to that? What should we reply, for instance, to the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk who, in a famous lecture entitled *Regulations for the Human Park*,<sup>6</sup> defended theories about post-humanity with questions of that kind? Of course ready-made answers to those questions can be found if we want to argue solely from quotations and religious precepts. But Fukuyama is right to say it would be disastrous to give the impression that decisions about regulation, and especially about informing citizens as to the real situation and the issues at stake, will simply depend on the confrontation between the scientific community, by nature open and creative, and a religion that would only be tense and defensive regarding a dogma of human nature formed in the image of God. For after all is God not also the God of evolution, in Father Teilhard de Chardin's phrase?

At the bottom of decisions to ban certain biotechnological manipulations such as cloning there lies, as we know, the notion of *human dignity*. But though it is indisputably the thing in whose name the human community has indeed the duty to regulate, are we sure about its meaning? Is it simply equivalent to the concept of human nature? Is it the totality of natural rights attached to the human person? If so, which of those rights is denied by possible biotechnological experiments? It is not easy to agree on the philosophical basis of that bulwark idea, which is nonetheless very necessary.

Bergson helped us to think human dignity but without letting it ossify in the idea of a human nature. Precisely because in thinking of it as a life force we then contrast the movement of *intensification* of life with its mere extension. As Muhammad Iqbal wrote, who was in fact a Bergsonian, it is not a question of adding matter to matter but attaining an intensity of life that is beyond the reach of death.<sup>7</sup> And this intensity is contrary to that notion of extension which is at the heart of post-humanist argu-

ments. If in the line of evolution humanity was the exceptional departure Gilles Deleuze talks of,<sup>8</sup> which is ‘the power to transcend one’s level and one’s condition’, it is intensification, creation and emancipation, as Bergson teaches us, and not extension and addition. In other words it is a movement of spiritualization, the very thing that implied the suppressed tension and desire in *Brave New World*. That spiritualization occurs first in privileged souls, of which there are examples, according to Bergson, among artists and mystics. And from soul to soul it draws the design of an open society, a society of creative people, since Creation was an ‘enterprise . . . to create creators’, as the author of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* tells us.<sup>9</sup> The task of creators to work to imprint on the human condition the impulse of life is thus a movement of transcendence of the human by the human. But, as we see, that movement does not lead towards post-humanity but towards an overabundance of humanity, towards what Teilhard de Chardin, another Bergsonian, called ‘a humanization of the earth’.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

### Notes

1. Barjavel (1974).
2. Bergson (1988).
3. Onfray (2003).
4. Fukuyama (2002).
5. Salomon (1991: 132).
6. Sloterdijk (1999).
7. Iqbal (1996).
8. Deleuze (1988).
9. Bergson (1977).

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