

# Between the Middle Ages, the Contemporary, and the Future: (Towards) a Trans-Post-Humanist Body

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Faced with the challenges of emerging technologies and impossibility of thinking human beings in the humanistic sense, I propose a convergent philosophical approach to posthumanism(s) and transhumanism(s). So, by means of ideas drawn from (medieval and contemporary) philosophy, my contribution is informed by conceiving a non-anthropocentric and posthumanist transhumanism. My focus is the body as a crucial node of both transhumanism(s) and posthumanism(s), in that its consideration by one and the other seems to mark a major front of divergence between them (tool body according to transhumanism(s), dimensional body according to posthumanism(s)). My reflection is carried out, by drawing two theoretical reservoirs: the thought of Roger Bacon (13th century) and of Michel Serres. I take the former as a reference for transhumanist front and the latter as a reference for posthumanist one. I thus hypothesize that Bacon's doctrine of the prolongation of life can be considered as an anticipation of the transhumanist research of earthly human immortality. So, I examine Bacon's idea that the adhesion of human activity (alchemy and medicine) with the course of nature can produce, through the preparation of a long life drug, the *aequalitas terrena*, which is an operation of restoration/conservation of the state of bodily natural balance (health), with the connected prolongation of life within the limits allowed by nature. I therefore dwell on the Baconian idea of a body in whose wholeness of person the solution of continuity between the biological and the spiritual is attenuated, and on the connected idea, not of transcending the earthly man, but of the restoration of his fullness of person. In my thesis, Baconian ideas, anticipating transhumanism(s), can induce positions in it of care of body, without transpassing in the empowerment; of body normalization, without going beyond it; of consideration of the body as a dimension of the human and not as an instrument or burden; of the consideration of man as a natural form and not as a center. These positions can also find convergences with posthumanism(s) and Serres, that carry forward the idea of informational irreducibility of the body as well as that of its irreproducibility, and therefore of its dimensionality for man (in hybridization with nature and technology). I assume that these convergences can lead to an idea of the body as a meeting ground between transhumanism(s) and posthumanism(s): a trans-post-humanist body.

*Keywords:* body, transhumanism, posthumanism, Roger Bacon, Michel Serres

## Introduction

Faced with the challenges of emerging technologies and actual impossibility of thinking human beings in the humanistic sense, I propose a convergent philosophical approach to posthumanism(s) and transhumanism(s).

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In a perspective of reconstruction of the paths of ideas, my contribution, by means of ideas drawn from medieval and contemporary philosophy suggests the possibility to begin to conceive a non-anthropocentric and posthumanist transhumanism. To this purpose, I take as my focus the body as a crucial node of both transhumanism(s) (Bostrom, 2005; Moravec, 1988, 1998; Blake, Molloy, & Shakespeare, 2012; Clark, 2003; Jones & Whitaker, 2009; Barilan, 2006) and posthumanism(s) (Hayles, 1999; Badmington, 2003; Wolfe, 2010; Braidotti, 2013, 2017, 2019; Nayar, 2013; Marchesini, 2018; Ferrando, 2019) in that its consideration by one and the other seems to mark a major front of divergence between them: a tool body in transhumanist view and a dimensional body in posthumanist one.

My reflection is carried forward drawing on two theoretical reservoirs, undoubtedly temporary distant as well as apparently difficult to put together: the thought of Roger Bacon (13th century) (Hackett, 1997; Power, 2006; Rignani, 2002) and of Michel Serres (Abbas, 2005; Assad, 1999; Crahay, 1988; L'Yvonnet & Frémont, 2010; Rödel, 2016). In a way that from afar could recall medieval posthumanist approach (Joy & Dionne, 2010), I take the former as a reference for transhumanist front as a whole, and the latter as a reference for posthumanist one as a whole.

So, firstly I argue, as a kind of correspondent of the transhumanist research of earthly human immortality, that Bacon's doctrine of the prolongation of life in the terms of a restoration/conservation of natural balance of the body (health) intended in its wholeness of person, biological and spiritual together, can induce positions in transhumanism(s) of care of body itself without transpassing in the empowerment, of body normalization without going beyond it, of consideration of the body as a dimension of the human and not as an instrument or burden. Secondly, I guess that these positions can find convergences with posthumanism(s)' and Serres' ones carrying forward body's informational irreducibility, irreplaceability/irreproducibility, and dimensionality for the human. Consequently, I assume that just these convergences can ultimately lead to an idea of the body as a meeting ground between transhumanism(s) and posthumanism(s), i.e., a trans-post-humanist body.

### **The Body Between the Transhumanism(s) and the Middle Ages**

As said, firstly I engage a sort of theoretical dialogue between current transhumanist ideas/perspectives and past correspondent ones, such as Franciscan 13th century Philosopher Roger Bacon's idea of *prolongatio vitae* (pro-longevity) obtainable through the production of an alchemical-medical-pharmacological elixir able to transform the elemental complexion of the human body bringing it back to equilibrium (*aequalitas*).<sup>1</sup> It is worth observing incidentally that this doctrine of life prolongation is an important element in Bacon's naturalist-empiricist anthropological approach—whose spiritualist accent and religious reference are however never less—oriented to the revaluation of the natural-corporeal-sensitive dimension of the human. A kind of an evaluation that is part of a secular 13th-14th-15th century philosophy (*philosophia mundana*) generally characterized by the attempt to affirm naturalistic and immanent principles of interpretation of the natural world.

I therefore put these positions in tension with those that appear to be key ideas of the current transhumanist orientations, such as technical manipulation capable of modifying the boundaries of life, human liberation from the biological condition, possibility of the infinite permanence in the immanent condition or even search for

<sup>1</sup> The Baconian concept of *complexio aequalis* signifies a state in which the qualities of the four elements (hot, dry, cold, wet) are in condition of harmony. The incorruptibility, the temperament of the elements is therefore constituted by a reciprocal harmonization of the four qualities. This elementary quality based *aequalitas* is explicitly equated by Bacon to the “form of the body in celestial things”; this allows us to understand how the elementary *aequalitas* could have been designated by the term fifth essence, which in Aristotelian philosophy indicates the incorruptible material substance of celestial bodies.

eternal youth.

As known, from the transhumanist debate emerges the idea of a technical intervention capable of affecting the boundaries of life, but also and above all the exaltation of the tension of the human being to self-fulfilment, that comes to hypotheses/outcomes of disincarnating as, for example, the idea of the mind uploaded to a computer. According to this perspective, the biological body is a burden from which to free itself either in the sense of emancipation from the biological condition or going beyond the legacy of the species. Transhumanizing means therefore passing from the condition produced by the biological evolution—body as phylogenetic legacy to a meta-biological dimension—body rebuilt by techno-science. Hence the idea of the need for a redesign/reprogramming of the body in the sense of the slowing down of the aging process, the increase in longevity, the improvement of cognitive functions, and the increase in performativity.

In other words, if the body is by transhumanism(s) understood as a sort of machine which subjectivity fully disposes of being able to improve and correct it while waiting to manage to definitively abandon it, however, the aspiration seems not so much a spiritual immortality, but rather an indefinite permanence in the immanent condition, that is to say an earthly immortality. At this point, the value of the body, invested with the instrumental role of the ferryman of subjectivity, seems to be identified in the equilibrium and stability on which it can count in carrying out this transshipment of the subjectivity from the biological to the meta-biologic dimension; an equilibrium which could be achieved by means of a redesign that as possible takes threats of old age and death away, while waiting for techno-science to make transhumanize possible. It is therefore in such a perspective that transhumanism comes to juxtapose proposals for strengthening the body to proclamations of its abandonment towards a post-organic and post-biological condition, for the fact that the main finality precisely seems that of emancipation of subjectivity from bodily restraints; an orientation that is coherently pursued both in the idea of reprogramming the body itself and in the affirmation of its abandonment.

Considering, as I have said, that the mythical theme of the extension of life, slowing down of aging, as well as longevity research promoted by the human opus emerges in Bacon's anthropological reflection too, the question of what positions Baconian ideas can eventually induce in the changed/different transhumanist context seems to me unavoidable, even crucial. To face and try to answer this question, it is therefore essential to more closely take a look at Bacon's positions.

As mentioned, the doctrine of *prolongatio vitae* is a significant element in Baconian anthropological reflection, which, between religious and philosophical-scientific-natural plane, carries forward the idea of the human as a composite and dynamic unit of spiritual and natural dimension, and reserves particular attention to the body and the topic of physical health.

In the context of his idea of science as implementation of mankind in its possibilities—albeit limited and included in an ultra terrestrial perspective—Bacon, in dynamic tension/unity with spiritual religious anthropology, builds a scientific medical alchemic natural anthropology in which the human is conceived as one of the many natural forms, and alchemy and medicine are to acquire an extreme utility in the pursuit of physical health, longevity, and in aging slowing down. And it is just in these common foundations that alchemical and medical knowledge come to converge; that is to say, in the pursuit of *aequalitas*, which is nothing but the restoration of health and longevity which in the early antiquity human *naturaliter* enjoyed (Bacon, 1965). Alchemy and medicine therefore are invested with the task of promoting health—connected to the extension of life within the limits allowed by nature—reproducing in the human body the conditions closest to perfect equality.

It is worth noting in this regard that the theme of *aequalitas* is encompassed with the question of the possibility of a total, bodily and spiritual perfection of humanity, which finds exemplification in the early men and in the Christian dogma of the resurrection of bodies. *Aequalitas* is so to speak synonymous with immortality and therefore Bacon does not go so far as to absolutely attribute it to Adam who needed nourishment, rather considering it the exclusive prerogative of the resurrected bodies. Although he maintains that the balance of the complexion of pre-lapsarian humanity was much greater than that which was his contemporary; that the patriarchs of long life, though fallen into sin, could naturally live for a thousand years; and that, only after the universal flood, life gradually diminished, because the human, driven out of paradise, no longer led a healthy life (Molland, 1993).

At this point, what, for Bacon, alchemy and medicine can do by natural means is to try to prepare a drug, precisely the *elixir*, which reproduces in the human body the conditions closest to *aequalitas*, prolonging physis life and approximating it to the resurrected body; a thing, this one, which nevertheless is remitted to the divine initiative. God in fact with the ashes of the dead will make a body from the *complexio aequalis* of which, at the moment of the resurrection, bodies will be constituted (Paravicini Bagliani, 2009; Crisciani, 2009). The intimate adherence of human activity (*ars*) with *cursum naturae* can therefore produce a natural earthly equality, but not a heavenly one, which by Bacon is returned to the divine initiative. Immortality, at the earthly level, seems in fact to dimension itself in pro-longevity (Needham, 1974; Paravicini Bagliani, 2003), that is in resolution of the unnatural state of corruption that leads to death, in restoration of the state of natural balance and health, and therefore in human physical temperament transformation which approximates it to resurrected body.

Baconian *prolongatio vitae* seems therefore to be the point of convergence between the idea of human Christian salvation and the affirmation of a biological-natural vision of it: in the body, in its entirety of person, as hinted before, the solution of continuity between the biological-natural and the spiritual seems to diminish. The physical body is restored and rejuvenated in order to be made analogous to the glorious body: The perspective of salvation constitutes for Bacon the horizon of the biological consideration of the human, which justifies the alchemical-medical opus and at the same time puts immortality and trans-humanizing—which means becoming, by divine work, human in an incorruptible way—back to divine initiative. The alchemical-medical objective of Bacon consequently does not seem the transcendence of the earthly human, but the restoration of its fullness of person, in the horizon of the Christian history of salvation.

Contemporary process of technological hypertrophy and secularization so to speak seems to have emphasized within the transhumanist perspective Baconian theme of *prolongatio vitae* in the direction of an unconditional accentuation of the potentials of technical intervention on the human body—reified; not only and not so much in the sense of care/standardization, but rather of empowerment/overcoming.

However, even if the extreme idea of an immortality and incorruptibility—placed by religion in the otherworldly life-obtainable by human work in the immanent material context has been emerging/affirming significantly within transhumanism(s), I am convinced that Baconian ideas could set new trajectories for the present/future of transhumanist thought and trigger meta-reflective critical rethinking processes in transhumanism(s) itself. That is to say, Bacon could precisely induce positions in it of care of body without transpassing in the empowerment; of body normalization without going beyond it; of consideration of the body as a dimension of the human and not as an instrument or burden. All this are in a non-anthropocentric context.

In other words, in the light of the suggestion of Baconian ideas, transhuman reified body could/should be rethought in terms of human constitutive dimension, which, as such, must be restored, i.e., brought back to its natural/original condition of balance and longevity; and not instead rebuilt, redesigned, abandoned, or surpassed.

### **The Body Between the Transhumanism(s) and the Contemporary (Posthumanism(s))**

I am convinced, as said, that these positions can find convergences with posthumanism(s)' and notably with Serres' in his affinities with the posthumanist front as a whole. To this respect, it is worth noting that, although Serres never declared himself posthumanist, his philosophy of *hominescence*, as an expression of an epochal turning point in the process of hominization—the becoming human of the humanity<sup>2</sup> (Serres, 2001; 2003; 2004; 2006), could be taken as a sort of catalyst for issues salient in the posthumanist debate. Issues which, among others, are the theme of human change (effective change of human condition, change of perception of it, theming/management of the change, etc.), borders (between human and other than human), and besides and above all, of the body, intended not yet as an object/tool, but as a constitutive, anthropologic dimension for the human.

In the Serresian reflection, as well as in a broad sense in posthumanism, the body assumes in fact a cognitive and hybrid-cultural scope and in this manner a dimensional value for the human. We have therefore to do with a mimetic-metamorphic body, condition and ground of knowledge as hybridization, place of psychophysical flexibility, in continuity/exchange with other than human.

But, faced with such a pregnant body and particularly with its inevitable immersion in a context in which communication networks master real time as well as global space tending to perform all or part of human activities, and refined simulations and bodiless experience progressively go taking hold, questions as “What can we do and not do without the body?”, “What knowledge can we acquire?” “What manipulation can we experience without it?” “What work can we do at a distance?” (Serres, 2011, p. 140) become unavoidable.

It is in this way that Serres, thinking about the difference between body and machine, artificial intelligence and human intuition, signal processing and reaction times in unexpected situations, wonders how far one can arrive without real presence. Noting therefore that the crucial question ultimately is that concerning the presence, the testimony, the acts, and the very being of the body, he comes to think of the latter as adherence that resists messenger and as what defines the extreme limits of that networks and software, at least for the moment, fail to realize.

The consideration of the body as a “subject”, bearer of intelligence, active at the origin of knowledge, consequently induces a critical rethinking of artificial simulation, reproduction/reproducibility, substitution/substitutability of the body itself and intelligence. Advancing doubts on the possibility of simulating the brain, but even more on the possibility of replacing the body, and therefore on the sophistication both of computer science and robotics, Serres goes so far as to say that without the body we can do everything except for a residue of essential, and think of the formal but hardly the real. So that, faced with the progressive imposition of bodiless experience, simulations, knowledge, in which information dominates and the body tends to be knocked out, that is to say to become an exception in the bombardment of signals, asking for a

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<sup>2</sup> *Hominescence* is an inchoative neologism thanks to which Serres expresses the fact that, for the first time in his history, no longer human inherits its condition, but begins to produce it itself entertaining new relationships with its body (subjective dimension of *hominescence*), the world (objective dimension), and other humans (collective dimension).

supplement of body becomes almost necessary (Serres, 2011, pp. 140-142).

In a sort of a convergence with post-human front, Serres seems therefore to point out the in-eludibility of flesh, which, alone, however distinguishes human from the machine (Serres, 2015). In this sense, the body constitutes the element that distinguishes human intelligence from artificial one, as well as an element of elevation (Serres, 1999). So, according to Serres, as precisely a theoretical reference for the posthumanist front, the body is a surplus, an adherence that resists messengers, a discriminant element which makes the difference compared to the machine, and which, for that, is irreducible to the latter, as well as artificially irreproducible.

From Serres and from the posthumanist front, I finally seem to be able to collect the idea of body's artificial irreproducibility and essentiality; an idea which, against proposals/prospects of disincarnation, ends up pointing out the need for a body supplement. If then, without a doubt, Serres and posthumanism(s) speak of a new body for a new age, they speak of its novelty in terms of hybridizing dimensionality for the human, and of crucial junction of this new age. That is, and in any case, they always speak of it as still a body.

### **Conclusion: (Towards) a Trans/Posthuman Body**

From the bold and unprecedented bringing together of the transhumanist idea of the body re-read, so to speak, in the light of Baconian doctrine of *prolongatio vitae* and the post-humanist idea of the body catalysed/filtered by the Serresian philosophy of *hominescence*, it seems to me that I am able to gain the concept of a trans/posthuman body. A body in which the trans component can be identified in the cure/normalization, as Bacon intends it, and in which the post component can be collected in the hybridizing-cultural-cognitive and dimensional extent. Consequently, I am convinced that for now and for the future we can think of a body as a meeting ground between trans and post component, for the fact that improvement/extension of life does not mean disincarnation but rather normalization of a dimensional value, which is such due eminently to the ability to at par exchange, hybridization with otherness, within a process, as in this case, of technological infiltration in which the technique no longer is just an anthropocentrically managed human enhancement tool, and, at the same time, body no longer is an object to be used for and then eventually to get rid of.

The body that technology, as an infiltrative agent, contributes to normalize bringing it back to its dimensional value as hybridizing is ultimately a trans/posthuman body in the sense that it is a body anthro-po-de-centrally contaminated by the technology that preserves it in its dimensionality, in the exclusion, moreover, of any perspectives of meta-biological disincarnation.

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