

ALJAŽ ŠKRLEP in conversation with GIOVANNI LEGHISSA
The point is not to become something different from what we are, the point is to think of ourselves in a different way

*Who are we?
What is our
position in
the world?
Which are the
differences
between men
and women;
human beings,
animals, plants
and artifacts?
What can we
learn from
the flowering
studies of
animal and
plant ontology?*

AS Let us start at the beginning. The term *posthumanism* has a relatively long history in philosophical and cultural studies. What is the core of the posthumanist program in your opinion and what is the status of the movement at this precise moment?

GL First of all, we should not forget that posthumanism is not a new stream within contemporary philosophy, it's more of an attitude, sort of an attempt to articulate old questions from a different and new perspective. Of course, there is something new in the *post* of posthumanism, but it's mainly an attempt to reformulate old questions: who are we; what is our position in the world; what about political problems; what about the difference between men and women; what about the difference between us as human beings and artifacts we create; what about the role of technique in the landscape we inhabit; and last but not least – what about the difference between us and other animals. For me it's important to make a reference to Cary Wolfe, one of those who tried to develop the posthumanist attitude in the US. For him the main authors he used in order to develop this new discourse were Derrida on the one hand and Niklas Luhmann on the other. And this is an important point, because if we take into consideration Derrida's philosophy, we find there many conceptual tools that are very useful to help us understand why we ought to overcome the old humanistic attitude. First of all, the difference between us and animals. We take for granted that we are better than other animals, simply because we can talk. Animals of different species don't talk, so the fact that we talk is the proof that we occupy different and superior position in the hierarchy of nature. This evolutive advantage is in a certain way a matter of fact, but is not enough to state that there is an ontological difference between us and other animals. Let's consider the way Derrida deconstructs Heidegger's philosophy, who said that philosophy before him was not able to think of the difference between *Sein* and *Seiende*. There are many interesting points in Heidegger's philosophy concerning humanism, he tried to criticize it, but at the same time – as Derrida has shown very clearly and persuasively – Heidegger

himself was perhaps the last representative of the old humanistic tradition, because he refused to confer to animals an important role. Animals are not able to think, they do not occupy our position – the position of *Dasein* – in the realm of being, they cannot perceive the worldliness of the world, because they do not speak. For Derrida this is a presupposition, which is not grounded at all and precisely this presupposition is the origin of all forms of violence within our Western tradition. The discourse of philosophy was in a certain way intertwined with other discourses which led to the legitimation of violence. And this legitimation against animals is precisely what we take for granted. It is true that we began at a certain point to deconstruct the colonial violence, the violence that came and is still coming, unfortunately, from different forms of racism, and we became aware also of the fact that sexism, the patriarchal structure of our society, implies specific forms of violence. But the first form of violence is the violence against animals. And the fact that we were not ready until recent times to perceive the violence against animals was probably at the root of the fact that we needed so much time to perceive our forms of violence against non-European people, women and so on. For Derrida it is clear that first of all we have to deconstruct the conceptual tools that underpin our idea of the difference between us and other animals. Of course, we are different, as well as we are different from artifacts or plants or forests; but how we conceived, how we structured, conceptually speaking, *the* difference between us and other animals was wrong in the sense that it was not philosophically grounded. The second point is that Niklas Luhmann, thanks to his system theory, helps us understand in which sense we are a part of a broader system and helps us understand that we are structured in layers. Our idea of subjectivity was related to the fact that we build a unity, subject is a unified entity in a certain way, that can reflect upon itself etc. According to Luhmann, subjectivity is a layered structure, in a sense that, when we speak with other people we communicate. Society is made of an uninterrupted flow of communication, even the one we do not speak

– the decision not to speak is a form of communication, of course. We are different when we deal with ourselves, when we are alone with ourselves and when we reflect upon ourselves, in that case we do not communicate, we do something different. Another system which has its own autonomy is our biological body, our brain for example, it works on its own, thanks to its own inner laws. All of these aspects of our subjectivity are intertwined with each other, but we shouldn't miss the layered structure of our subjectivity. And what does this have to do with posthumanism? Posthumanism is an attempt to dethrone human subjects from the place they occupied previously. So, we are nothing but parts of a more complex system, the system of society, the biological system, evolution, our body is a result of the story of evolution that doesn't depend on us, our will. We are a result of a story, in which we are not kings, so to say. Communication as well – when we communicate, we imply the existence of language, but language is not a creation of mine or yours. The language and all possible forms of codified language existed before us, so in the moment when we decide to communicate, we enter in a different system – that's the point. So, this layered structure, the fact that there are many layers, within which we can occupy different positions from time to time implies a different way of conceiving our subjectivity. Derrida's deconstruction on the one hand, Luhmann's system theory on the other, are the two first philosophical steps we have to make toward posthuman attitude.

AŠ This idea of language being external to us reminds me of something that William Burroughs once wrote, that language is a virus coming from another world and of this strange idea that we think that language is something ours instead of thinking that we are in a language. But thinking about what you just talked about and the fact that there are so many different versions of posthumanism – for example transhumanism, antihumanism etc. – I got the idea of two different paths to take: one is to speak and think about the unhuman world, because knowing something makes you in a way appreciate it, see its value; on the other side – this is more of a Deleuzian sort of posthumanism, I suppose –

it's this thing about us being layered. We should get to the unhuman world, because it's already a world that is a part of us, that is in us, but human identity doesn't let this unhuman blossom.

GL In this perspective, identity, both my personal identity and the collective identity of mankind in general, must be seen as a precarious position. From time to time we occupy different positions that allow us to say 'I am that and not that', 'I am a member of the Italian or Slovenian culture' and so on. It depends on the place where the position is cited and each of us has the opportunity to occupy different positions within different systems. These systems are of course related to each other, there is an intersection between them. The biological history of mankind is something that affects us, we are the result of it. At the same time, we are affected by our belonging to a cultural tradition. The point is that all these systems are intertwined with each other. On the contrary, transhumanism wants to insist on the fact that we are human and they want in a certain way to save the humanity from the forms of vulnerability that effected it since yesterday. In the moment in which we enter the new technological era, in the moment in which technological progress has made giant steps, then we can have the opportunity to transform ourselves in something better, different from what we were. The point is that the idea of mankind in transhumanism remains the same, the old humanistic idea. The only point is that we can avoid dying in a certain way, because sooner or later the day will come in which we will say "OK, death doesn't affect me anymore, because I have technological tools, thanks to biotechnologies, for example, to make my life longer." So, transhumanism is sort of a mythology of technology, an attempt to make the new progresses within the realm of biotechnologies our new god, the god that will save us from old illnesses like death. This ameliorations of what constitutes the core of our humanity let this core to be the same. For posthumanism we have to abandon in a certain way the old conception we had of ourselves. To point is not to become something different from what we are, the point is to think of ourselves in a different way, not

only for philosophical reasons but also for political reasons.

AŠ Speaking about AI and computers, I can understand going down this path, because this really is an old utopian thought, just think about for example sci-fi novels. There are also a lot of important questions coming from the sphere of technology, for example the question of free will, immortality. I can also understand bringing animals into the conversation, because we can say that humans are essentially speaking animals. But then there is another path I wanted to talk to you about: How, why and with what theoretical resources can we include into the posthumanistic discourse also the plant? Because of political or also transformational reasons, as I would like to call them?

GL The idea that plants are subjects, the idea that we can bestow agency to plants is a very recent one, but a very important one, because it implies an enlargement of the posthumanistic perspective, until let's say 10 or 15 years ago posthumanism was about the difference between us and animals of other species, so the idea was to reintroduce the idea of animality in our conception of ourselves. But know we are philosophically ready to say that plants have an agency as well as other living beings. It's a sort of an extension of the idea of agency to all the realm of living beings, not forgetting that at the core of this conception is the fact that the most important thing is to understand what is an autopoietic system. The question has not to do with life alone, the core of the philosophical discussion has to do with the idea of autopoiesis. Animals, plants and certain intelligent machines are all self-reproducing systems. But then of course you have an ethical implication, because if you're ready to consider a plant as something that is not essentially different from you, then you have a different relation to it, you can begin a different love story, in a certain way, with the environment inhabited by plants. The last goal of these reflections has to do with ecological questions. The idea is to imagine a different relationship between mankind and the environment, the environment where plants are as important as all living beings.

AŠ In relation to our relationship to other living beings, we have to talk about about the famous begin-

ning of Derrida's book *L'animal que donc je suis* (2006), when he is recalling about a time he was seen naked by a cat. An interesting question comes to mind, because Levinas – the thinker of the face – said in an interview that animals do not have a face, because they do not have language. But Derrida makes it clear that there is something, that there is a kind of a gaze, maybe a gaze of the abyss, something that is very loose and non-subjective – but still a gaze, nevertheless. Maybe this hesitation has something to do also with the facelessness of the plant. But: there is something there, an important non-gaze. In his *De Anima* Aristotle wrote that a plant does have a soul which is lifeless, so not a kind of soul an animal has. But he says that a plant is not a thing, as it is incomplete, so it's actually less than a thing. He used the word *ateles*, without a *telos*, without a purpose, without a goal, a kind of a bad infinity if we use Hegelian terminology. Absolutely frightening: You don't have anything to really look at, but the plant is working, constantly working, growing, expanding.

GL You're right! And Hegel made interesting reflections upon the rule of plants and the natural world, but he could not attribute to plants the capability to act, to move, but this is perhaps related to the fact that scientific knowledge in that time was not complete. Nowadays we know perfectly well that plants do act, do behave as if they have a consciousness, because we have many studies that show us to which extent each single plant is able to adapt itself creatively in its own environment: they tend to grasp the light they lack, they tend to go deeper and deeper with their roots until the point they reach more water etc. There is a sort of an intentionality about it. We can well say that plants act intentionally. Of course, one could ask, why should we use the term intentionality in regard to plants – it's an excessive extension of the term. I say – why not? But this is only a philosophical question. I think it's not that important. The most important thing is what biologists tell us. They show us very clearly that the world of plants is a very complex one, as complex as the world of other living beings. Plants move themselves and modify the environment they live in. This is the most important aspect of the whole discussion, because this means that we can go back to the original Darwin. Starting from the

1980s, thanks to authors like Gould, Eldredge and Lewontin, there is a broad consensus that the right way to read Darwin is the following one: Darwin was not saying that we depend simply on our environment. Each single species both depends on the selection and contributes to the modifying of the environment. So, there is a biunivocal, what in German you would call *Wechselwirkung*, interplay; there is an interplay between the pressure from the environment and the way the single species modifies the environments it lives in. This was the original idea of Darwin, but after Darwin came Social Darwinism, racism etc., the political uses of Darwinism. We had to wait until the end of the 20th century to read Darwin in the proper and right way – also the politically correct way *laugh*. This idea of an interplay gives us an opportunity to understand the behavior of plants in a different way.

AŠ So, we can say that animal and plant ontologies can and should influence the interpretation of our own human ontology. We also know that you have been dealing a lot also with politics and political theory. What would you say that the animal and the plant can teach us in respect to ethics and politics? Can the concept of the forest – the main theme of this edition of *Robida* magazine – in some way challenge the established political discourse? Can we understand it as a concept with some sort of transformational value?

GL This is the question! We can keep on discussing about plants, animals, human beings from a philosophical point of view for the rest of our lives without changing anything, but the point is that we have to change everything in the realm of values in order to transform our society, because there is an interplay between the political forms of human societies and the way in which we deal with our environment. And the societal forms we were acquainted with until recently are responsible for the destruction of the environment, so the ecological question is the political question of our present and the next decades. If we don't change our social system, we deem ourselves as human species to self-destruction. We have no time at all to discuss what is right, what is wrong. We are in a hurry; we have to change our social structure as soon as possible

in order to prevent ourselves from destroying ourselves. But in my opinion in order to change our society, we have to change our mindsets and that's why philosophical discussions about animality, plants, cyborgs, artifacts, posthumanism are so important. I'm not saying that philosophers can change the world. But from philosophical discussions we can acquire the conceptual tools to change our values in order to change our social structure. That's why it is important to bear in mind that on the one hand we have ontological problems, what different sciences tell us about the structure of plants, animals, the environment, evolution, on the other hand we have epistemological questions, that is: how do we conceive of ontological structures of living beings in general; what are the conceptual transformations we have to presuppose in order to build a new ontology. So, this strictly philosophical problems are very important and they are the premise for a new ethics and a new politics. And we have to learn to consume and to produce differently, to share the resources in a different way, to distribute resources in a different way and take into account that animals and plants are not resources. They are part of our life. The concept of resource is important here, because if you consider plants and animals as a tool we use to nourish ourselves and that's all – then nothing will change.