DEBUNKING FAKE HUMANITIES
CRITICAL REASONING FROM OVID TO RO-BOETHICS

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ABSTRACT
We assume that the sense of being human involves our critical attitude of reasoning, but when we come across the roots of this capability, we get lost in logic, philosophy of language, metaphysics, neurobiology, and ethics. Nowadays, the expression “debunking fake news” is the practice of calling into question or denying false, exaggerated or unscientific statements. In accordance with that definition of debunking, is it possible to debunk fake humanities? And, above all, which are the fake humanities we are referring to? Our proposal aims to discuss this foundation of common reasoning - which relies on the “human measure” - through ancient myths and the idea of Metamorphoses, that the Roman poet Ovid delivered to us in his poem as a kind of predisposition to debunking; then moving forward in the article, we will look through the hermeneutic lens of one of the latest debates between the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur and the neuroscientist Jean Pierre Changeaux about human being’s identity, which will help us to engage critically the ethical aspects of upcoming metamorphoses such as Robotics.

KEYWORDS
Debunking, Metamorphoses, Identity, Roboethics, Hermeneutics.

When we talk of “human measure”, we easily remember that humanity has named itself homo sapiens, “wise man”, making wisdom converge with the practice of measurement. We assume that the sense of being human involves our critical attitude of reasoning, but when we come across the roots of this capability, we get lost in logic, philosophy of language, metaphysics, neurobiology, and ethics. Nowadays, the expression “debunking fake news” means to expose the falseness or hollowness of an idea or belief. Then, according to that meaning, we ask ourselves: is it possible to debunk fake humanities? And which are these fake humanities we are referring to?

We can refer either to a non authentic sense of humanity, or to a simulated, represented and, ultimately, artificial forms of humanity. So, our considerations will start from the debunking attitude of reasoning, then, move forward to metamorphic images of humanity, as the ones represented in ancient myths described by Ovid in his celebrated poem. Finally, when we run into a complex concept
such as the transformation of human nature, we will take advantage of the contribution of hermeneutical studies on human identity, offered by Paul Ricoeur, to set up an ethical toolbox in order to deal with upcoming metamorphoses such as humanoid robots and prosthetics.

1. DEBUNKING: A WORD JUST FOR COMMUNICATION LANGUAGES?

What is debunking? In the dictionary: to debunk means to prove that an idea or belief is not true. When something is debunked, it can be assumed that the idea or belief has been shown to be a pretentious or false claim or idea. To confute, refute, discredit can be equivalent in some respects.

The verb debunk was first used by an American writer, William Woodward, in 1923, to mean "take the bunk out of something", where “bunk” stands for “nonsense”.

In journalism, debunking fake news is the practice of calling into question or denying (making use of scientific methods) false, exaggerated or unscientific statements. It is easy to use in reference to paranormal phenomena, religious revelations, for example, or conspiracy theories, as well as manifestly unfounded medical information. Debunking suggests that something is not true, but often can be also merely untrue, it can even be a sham. We can simply disprove a myth: but if we debunk it, the assumption is that it was an unreasonable and ridiculous claim. Although, debunking is just a catchword.

Very often debunking involves the existential meaning of our lives as well. Its real meaning refers to the critical attitude of reasoning. Through their engagement with stories, historical documents, and poems, humanities students, for example, master the skills needed to correct the distortion that passes for "information" in the new digital age. Critical reading is not simply a hobby for the aesthetically inclined among us, but it is a crucial skill for citizenship in the current moment. Borrowing Peter Sloterdijk’s words:

Anyone who is asking today about the future of humanity and about the methods of humanization wants to know if there is any hope of mastering the contemporary tendency towards the bestialization of humanity. It is disturbing that bestialization, now as ever, tends to accompany displays of great power: whether as open warfare or raw imperial power, or in the daily degradation of human beings in entertainments offered by the media. (Sloterdijk, P. (2009), Rules for the Human Zoo: a Response to the Letter on Humanism, in “Environment and Planning D: Society and Space”, vol. 27, UK, p.15).

Along these lines, we approach debunking as a kind of human critical thinking able to save us from bestialization. However, another question remains open: what is going to keep debunkers steady in their humanity marked by finitude (so that
they can recognize the “bunk”, the nonsense which must be taken away) and at the same time away from the hegemony of their truth as well? Let’s put this question aside for the moment to look at new contributions.

2. METAMORPHOSES AND TRANSFORMATION. A COMPLEXITY RESOLVED BY ETHICS

If we go back over the centuries, we should consider the Metamorphoses poem as a real treasure chest donated by the great Roman poet Ovid. We believe that, in this context, the idea of the Metamorphoses, as a matter of fact, still works for us as a kind of debunking attitude.

Let us clarify this special reading of the Metamorphoses.

Ovid’s epic poem is a long and complex reading. Beginning with the creation of the world, and ending with Rome in his own lifetime, the Metamorphoses drags the reader through time and space, from beginnings to endings, from life to death, from moments of triumph and exultation to episodes of moral corruption and degradation. Drawing on the Greek mythology inherited by the Romans, Ovid directs his dramas one after another, describing dozens of hapless mortals, heroes and gods that emerge victorious, or by contrast, experience defeat, endure rape, and inevitably turn into something different from their original forms. The book is about ancient myths, but the true subject is the transformation of forms: transformation is a unifying theme amongst all the episodes, because «in nova fert animus mutates dicere formas corpora» as Ovid writes in the opening lines of the poem (Ovid, Metamorphoses, I, 1.4; «my mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms»). Ovid’s belief is that transformation is not just a discretionary element: it is a deeper part of the human condition indeed.

Omnia mutantur, nihil interit. Errat...spiritus eque feris humana in corpora transit inque fera noster, nec tempore deperit ullo utque novis facilis signatur cera figuris.

All things are changing; nothing dies. The spirit wanders...from beasts it passes into human bodies and from our bodies into beasts, but never perishes. And as the pliant wax is stamped with new designs (Ovid, Metamorphoses, XV, 165-170).

Throughout the poem, Ovid stands out as an acute observer of the changing natural world, a champion like Lucretius of the enlightened scientific values of the great Epicurus. In book Fifteen, Ovid points out the same concept with these words:

Caelum et quodcumque sub illo immutat formas tellusque et quodquid in illa est; nos quoque, pars mundi, quoniam non corpora solum, verum etiam volucres animae sumus inque ferinas possunmus ire domos pecudumque in corpora condi.

The heavens and whatever are beneath the heavens change their forms. The earth and all that is within it. We likewise change, who are a portion of the universe, and, since we are not only things of flesh but winged souls as well, we may be doomed to
enter into beasts as our abode; and even to be hidden in the breasts of cattle (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XV, 454-458).

Apollo and Daphne, Niobe, Hermaphroditus are just a few examples of this concept of transformation. Daphne is the nymph forced to sacrifice her body and become a laurel tree as her only possible escape from Apollo's unstoppable lust.

Niobe was a wealthy woman of Thebes, mother of seven sons and seven daughters. She dared to go against Leto, mother of Apollo and Diana, being proud of her rich fertility in comparison to the goddess’s motherhood. The goddess’s revenge was death for all her sons and daughters: Niobe was turned into stone, retaining her shape.

And still we can read of Hermaphroditus, the extraordinarily handsome son of Aphrodite and Hermes, the water nymph Salmacis fell in love, praying to be forever united, with him: she wrapped herself around the boy, strongly kissing him. While he struggled, she called out to the gods that they should never part. Her wish was granted, and their bodies blended into one form. Quoting Ovid’s words:

\[\text{Nec duo sunt sed forma duplex nec femina dici nec puer ut possit, neutrumque et utrumque videntur.}\]

They were no longer two, nor such as to be called, one, woman, and one, man. They seemed neither, and yet both (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV, 378-379).

The Italian Emilio Pianezzola, one of the most significant Latin Scholars and author of relevant commentaries on Ovid’s poem, points out three important aspects (Pianezzola, E. (2018), *Trasformare il mondo*, Padova University Press).

The first one is that Ovid does not simply describe the final outcomes of metamorphoses (for example, Dafne’s arms instantly transforming into branches), but, with words he ‘films’ the whole slow process of transformation, so that he sees and shows us in a new way the living creatures involved in the metamorphoses. That is completely different from the metamorphoses used in Kafka’s and Hoffmann’s writings, which seem to be the miraculous findings of a change already occurred.

The second aspect stems from the first one: Ovid’s metamorphoses can be defined as metaphors, and as metaphors they suggest a renewed vision of reality, they produce an estrangement effect, a de-formation that gives sharpness to our perception. Metamorphoses, like metaphors, represent a process of re-creation of reality starting from the concept of resemblance, as Aristotle pointed out in his *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*: they necessarily require an ability of seeing the similarity between the elements. Ovid proves to have such profound awareness of complexity, a deep sense of how things are tangled in their relationships.

1 Here we cannot elaborate further on a “history of resemblance” about metaphors from Aristotle to contemporary philosophy, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Iosif Brodskij, Gilbert Ryle,
3. METAMORPHOSES AND DEBUNKING: A NONSENSE TO TAKE OUT

We have come to the third point, which may well be the most sweeping one yet in this paper: finally, the idea of metamorphoses comes across the idea of debunking.

All the metamorphoses depicted in the poem are a distortion of reality, a denial of the natural order of things, because they symbolize an ontological shift, a fundamental change in what we consider the natural boundaries of being human. The image of a female body turned into stone obviously breaks down the wall that separates organic from inorganic material; a male body turned into a wolf involves overcoming the limit of the species. If we leave this realm of metaphors, we easily come across the nonsense: we are up against a “bunk”. And therefore, we must appeal to critical reasoning to debunk those myths.

Nevertheless, we absolutely need further significant analysis. Reality, considered as a whole, looks messy and inconsistent. Those transformations restore an ethical order of things. Metamorphoses respond to reality by helping the management of unacceptable and uncomfortable situations, resolving contradictions in the world; they bring salvation or doom, therefore, through this, performing an act of justice (Pianezzola, E. (2018), Trasformare il mondo, pp.56-59; (2010), Ovidio, dalla cosmogonia alla metamorfosi: per la riconposizione di un ordine universale, in “Materiali e discussioni”, 65, Pisa-Roma, pp.59-68).

Well, here we are: metamorphoses, instead of being debunked as fake humanities, must be considered as a capability of human imagination to recompose the ethical and social order. We stress that they reveal another level in the human discourse, something that is far from the dualism between true and fake, rational and unreasonable: they reveal a sort of “third level” in between, that should be further explored. This concept of a “third level” in the human discourse reminds us of the hermeneutical philosophy.

4. VITAL VALUES AND UPCOMING METAMORPHOSES

It is quite clear, in our context, that we are not analyzing metamorphoses in terms of myth, but in terms of transformation. All that entitles us to overlook Benjamin’s concern about myths: their narrative power - he says - blocks time in a loop of repetition, freezing natural life and, as a consequence, cutting off from nature any chance of redemption (Desideri, F. (1980), Walter Benjamin. Il tempo e le forme, Editori Riuniti, Roma).

Tzvetan Todorov. Ahead we will have the opportunity to mention Paul Ricoeur, so a reference should be made to his The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language, Routledge&Kegan Paul, University of Toronto Press, 1978.
Agamemnon will always be killed by Clytemnestra, Athena will always punish Ajax by the madness hurled at him. But metamorphoses, as we said, are transformations. As such they subvert the natural order of things: in this respect it is also relevant that monotheistic religions do not accept this subversion which unsettles the divine order of the universe.

If Descartes’s *Cogito* can be held as the opening of the era of modern subjectivity, the crisis of the *Cogito*, opened later by Hume, Nietzsche and Heidegger on different philosophical grounds, marks the start of a new question of identity. “The ego is not master in its own house”, Freud said. At the beginning of the 20th Century, self-consistency and self-stability slowly get lost. Literature then often faces this shredding of the “self” by underlining the need to reconnect to the natural world, again through metamorphoses: examples can be found in short stories about body estrangement as in *The Nose* by Nikolai Gogol and in *The Breast* by Philip Roth, obviously not to mention Franz Kafka’s namesake novel. This is the “third level” in the human discourse we mentioned before: a level that is neither neurobiological nor psychological.

Let’s introduce then the “third discourse” suggested by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur in his dialogue with Jean Pierre Changeaux, Professor of neurobiology at the Collège de France. *La nature et la règle* is the title of the famous book published in 1998. The first part consists of a series of conversations focusing on mind-body issues, while the second one approaches various themes related to moral rules and ethics of deliberation. Ricoeur and Changeux acknowledge the multiple “layers” of the human being (molecules, neurons, brain, behavior, aesthetics, creativity and morality) and the fact that we humans have two rather distinct ways of describing the human condition, the scientific way and the phenomenological one. They wanted to find out if neuroscience and philosophy can help us in dealing with this dualism. Is it possible to consider the mind as something distinct from the brain? Is the brain just a simple shelf which the mind is placed upon? And if the whole mental condition can be reduced to neurophysiological processes, what happens then to our cultural and moral constructs? Between real and fake, between facts and norms, between nature and culture, there is our *lived body*, as Husserl puts it, our body as experienced by one’s own self, a mix of consciousness and intentionality, as we learn from phenomenology. The experience we have of our body is a double one: as an object and as our own subjectivity as well. According to Ricoeur this is just a semantic dualism and not a substantial one.

Mental is not equivalent to the term immaterial in the sense of something noncorporeal. Mental experience implies the corporeal, but in a sense that is irreducible to the objective bodies studied by the natural science. Semantically opposed to the body-as-object of these sciences is the experienced body (Ricoeur, P. - Changeaux, J.P. (2002), *What makes us think? A Neuroscientist and a Philosopher Argue about*
Changeux believes that neuroscience is capable of explaining all human experiences, Ricoeur answers back by arguing that neurobiology will never be able to capture all the aspects of human experience and any "natural" explanation must be implemented by reflectivity, involvement, and social understanding. At the end we can say that this "third discourse" is about "vital values" (using George Canguilhem’s term), and those vital values originate from a "concrete reflection", a reflection which preserves humanity in metamorphoses (Abbate, F. (2012), *Paul Ricoeur e il terzo discorso. Soggetto, corporeità, estetica*, Editori Riuniti UP, Roma; Wong, M.T.H. (2018), *Ricoeur and the Third Discourse of the Person. From Philosophy and Neuroscience to Psychiatry and Theology*, Rowman&Littlefield, US).

5. CONCLUSION

Nowadays, we must get ready to deal with new kinds of metamorphoses: robots, prosthetics, cloning, genetic modifications of products, mutations. The creation of Artificial Intelligence recalls the dream of the “Extended Man” as described by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in his futuristic Manifesto of 1910.

The day when it will be possible for man to externalize his will so that, like a huge invisible arm, it can extend beyond him, then his Dream and Desire, which today are merely idle words, will rule supreme over conquered Space and Time. This nonhuman, mechanical species, built for constant speed, will quite naturally be cruel, omniscient, and warlike.

These words may sound today like a chilling prophecy. “Artificial” means something synthetic and which does not occur in nature; it is almost like a transitional phase between organic and inorganic matter. Still, we come across transformation of matter. As the human Niobe was turned into stone, we will slowly replace a mix of body organs. Prosthetics will replace or augment a missing or impaired part of the body. Also, the robotic market will be soon full of “geminoid” androids, like the ones admirably produced by Professor Hiroshi Ishiguro in his laboratory in Osaka: robots provided with human appearance, capable of facial expressions or physical gestures that convey human-like emotions. Again: the inorganic matter is going to be shaped in order to return to an ethical order.

“Certain questions about human beings can only be answered by employing androids experimentally”: it seems we are invited to ask questions based on a conviction that “androids can help us do much more than just discover how people relate to different kinds of robots. Because of their resemblance to people, androids have the potential to contribute to an understanding of human behavior.
and the roles our brains and bodies play in it” (MacDorman, K., Hiroshi, H., The uncanny advantage of using androids in cognitive and social science research Interaction, Studies, 7:3 (2006).

In the same way, many have observed that “AI is the name we give to technological processes which we do not understand. When we have familiarized ourselves with a process, it stops being called AI and becomes just another clever computer programme”, referring to the well-known phenomenon of the AI Effect (Turner, J., (2019), Robot Rules. Regulating Artificial Intelligence, Palgrave MacMillan). What will then happen to the concrete reflection supported by Ricoeur’s third discourse on the lived body? The challenge of the next future will be our choice for the human measure against or alongside an artificial intelligence defined as an “ability of a non-natural entity to make choices by an evaluative process” (Turner, J., 2019).

More is yet to come, and ethicists must quickly get ready for that.