

THE HUMAN MEASURE AND THE (IMPOSSIBLE?) LEGACY OF HUMAN- ISM

GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE

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ABSTRACT

For the last years Humanism has been called upon by political and religious leaders. Intellectuals and academics of varied stock and diverse sensibilities mourn the loss of humanist values and call in earnest for their hasty reinstatement. When asked how to restore meaning to the term “humanism”, Heidegger answered: “by providing man with a measure other than himself”. Accordingly, if anything akin to humanism should still be justified, this can only be with the question of the human measure not only as a historical legacy, but also a task and future perspective. This paper aims at imagining a post-humanism that – having worked through the grief for lost anthropocentrism: being “post” with regard to traditionally anthropocentric humanism – has discovered that boundaries certainly constitute an obstacle for humans, but they also constitute the symbolic space that allows for the manifestation of a surplus necessary to human life. That would be a new and promising understanding of the human measure.

KEYWORDS

Humanism, human measure, post humanism, transhumanism, civilisation

According to Eugenio Garin, one of the 20th Century's foremost scholars of Italian humanism and – alongside Ernesto Grassi¹ – one of the most committed advocates of its philosophical nature, the underlying philosophy of Italian humanism may be seen as a continuous enquiry into the *measure* of the human – its limitations and its prospects; a lesson on this measure for the artist, the scientist, the priest, the politician (i.e. what we today term civil society), rather than the professional philosopher; an admonishment to meet the task that the measure itself im-

¹ See E. Grassi, *La filosofia dell'umanesimo. Un problema epocale*, Tempi moderni edizioni, Napoli 1986.

plies.² The human measure as enquiry and admonishment would thus constitute a distinctive feature of 15th-Century Italian humanism.

When asked how to restore meaning to the term “humanism” today, Heidegger answered: “by providing man with a measure other than himself”.³ Accordingly, if anything akin to humanism should still be justified, this can only be with the question of the human measure not only as a historical legacy, but also a task and future perspective.

THE OBSESSION WITH MEASURE AND THE PARADOX OF IM-MEASURABLE MEASURE

What we notice today is a certain obsession with measure. Everything about the human being is being measured: body mass index, lean body mass and body fat percentage, cholesterol levels (good as well as bad) – all indices required to be kept with a given range. Then there is the number of online followers, a clear quantifier of public influence. The intelligence quotient. A scholar’s impact factor and their number of academic publications. Age – chronological and biological. The number of qualifying years towards one’s pension, and the amount of amassed social security contributions. What we are dealing with are quantifiable indicators delivering an allegedly objective basis for qualitative assessments to follow, that means a benchmark to determine the merits and the value of a human being.⁴

Everything is assigned a measure and may be evaluated according to a set of numerical, quantitative parameters that impose a rigid discipline if they are to be met: we are all perpetually on a diet, all subject to frantic pace and harsh discipline in order to meet our given objectives of physical fitness or performance at work. This is how individual human fulfilment is achieved: in work as well as in sex.

There is more: when trying to decide what has value, what deserves attention, what is fair and what is the right thing to do, we delegate the task of determining these matters to measures and numbers. What we are dealing with are judgements that – in the future – might increasingly be entrusted to artificial intelligence. It is plain to see how all this aligns into a twofold, collective flight from liberty: a self-imposed, strict discipline that allows us to meet quantitative standards which take

² See E. Garin *L’umanesimo italiano. Filosofia e vita civile nel Rinascimento*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1994, pp. 251-253 (orig. ed. *Der italienische Humanismus*, Verlag A. Francke, Bern 1947).

³ See F. Fédier, *L’humanisme en question. Pour aborder la lecture de la Lettre sur l’humanisme de Martin Heidegger*, Cerf, Paris 2012, p. 21

⁴ See G. Tognon, *La democrazia del merito*, Salerno, Roma 2016.

the burden of decision-making off our shoulders. This is the “self-dethroning story” of humanity that Richard Sennett wrote about.⁵

However, this is neither the “human measure” pursued in its day by Italian humanism, nor what we would like to put forward for discussion today.

What, then, do we mean when we speak of “human measure”? We are speaking of a paradox, given that our subject is an incommensurable measure, one ever exceeding measurability. A measure not measurable, i.e. not translatable into figures, performance quotas or yield. This is a measure that itself contests, so to speak, the very measurability of the human.

The paradox is the following: the measure of all things – we follow here the definition of the human provided by Protagoras – is itself incommensurable. It does not lend itself to objectification, it is not a thing ready to hand. Even if every possible measure is taken, nothing of its essence can be affirmed. Quite the opposite: the exhaustive measurements may make us lose sight of *the* measure; they serve to reduce the human being to readily available “bare life” (I am borrowing the term from Agamben).⁶ No wonder then that mensuration and assessment remain the foremost instruments of all worldly powers.

To the medieval man, the human measure was limpid. The human was the being positioned halfway between angel and animal, partaking in both and liable to ascent toward the one and descent toward the other. So it still was to Italian humanism, albeit with more emphasis on the possibilities opening up in human destiny. In Pico della Mirandola’s famed *Oratio* the Creator directs the following words to the human: “I have placed thee at the center of the world [*medium te mundi posui*], that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself [*quasi arbitrius honorariusque plastes et fictor*]; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes [*bruta*]. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul’s reason into the higher natures which are divine [*divina*].”⁷

The human being has thus long enjoyed a position of privilege within an ordered *cosmos*: man is overtly placed in a central and median position between the above and the below, within boundaries both inferior and superior to himself, a

⁵ See R. Sennett, *Humanism*, “The Hedgehog Review”, Summer 2011 (Volume 13, Issue 2), pp. 21-30: 28.

⁶ For the notion of “bare life”, see G. Agamben, *Homo sacer. Edizione integrale 1995-2015*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2018.

⁷ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio De homini dignitate* (1486); English translation: Charles Glenn Wallis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1998, p. 5

high and low that he is free to reach out to, debasing or elevating himself. The human measure was immeasurable, but clear.

NEGATED MEASURE: THE INHUMAN

It has been a while since we ceased to inhabit such an ordered *cosmos*, the human being no longer holds a central and median position. The heavens have become desolate, evidence for a qualitative distinction between man and animal has dwindled; in consequence, the very notion of the human measure has become anything but obvious. On the one hand, the human measure has lost its peculiar incommensurability as all qualitative differences to the non-human animal kingdom lose their rationale: what remains is a purely quantitative difference, one that easily lends itself to measurement.

On the other hand, with the heavens emptied, limitations from above are lifted: the criterion of biology is all that remains, and a techno-scientific promise of gradual extension, up to infinity, presents itself. The theocentric, inexpressible transhumanism of Dante - "To soar beyond the human / cannot be / described / in words"⁸ - gave way to an advancement that is potentially perpetual, yet manageable: its progressive and boundless gains may be measured and assessed.

The genealogy of this process, which mostly coincides with the dissolution of a long-untenable anthropocentrism, has had numerous interpretations. Freud derives this genealogy from three blows that our narcissism has had to suffer from Copernicus, Darwin - and Freud himself.⁹ Ricœur points to the teachings of the school of suspicion, namely Marx, Nietzsche, Freud.¹⁰ In the course of these revelations, the human being has discovered that, far from being master of the universe, he cannot claim to be master of himself and of his own house. Humankind's pride had been irreversibly shaken, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

In the wake of the mourning for anthropocentrism, the notion of the human measure has thus become impalpable. The question arises, however, whether this notion has also become irrelevant. To my mind, this is not the case. A demand for measure may still be perceived, if not for a capping measure from above, then certainly for one from below. A measure not intended to comfort a wounded pride, but to serve as a criterion of the human against the ever-present possibility of a negation of the human, the inhuman. A contingency that the tragic history of the 20th century, as well as these first decades of the 21st - from Auschwitz to the

⁸ Dante, *Paradiso* I, verses 70-71; English translation: Jean Hollander, Robert Hollander, Anchor Books, New York, 2008

⁹ See S. Freud, *Eine Schwierigkeit der Psychoanalyse* (1917), in *Gesammelte Werke*, t. XII, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 1947, pp. 3-12: 7-8.

¹⁰ See P. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1965, pp. 40-44.

drama of the migrants - have shown to be more than a merely theoretical hypothesis.

HUMANISM - A REGULATIVE IDEAL

It is precisely at this point that humanism enters the scene. The notion itself is polysemic and calls for preliminary clarification. I deem it necessary to distinguish at least three ways in which the term may serve: the historical and historiographic use, the cultural one and the axiological.

Humanism is above all a historical and historiographic term with a descriptive and interpretative function applied to certain points in European (though not exclusively European) intellectual history: Italian humanism of the 15th Century, German new humanism of the 18th (the *Goethezeit*), and the various humanisms of the 20th Century: the pedagogical (Jaeger), the Christian (Maritain), the Marxist (Fromm, Merleau-Ponty...), the existential (Sartre, Jaspers), the many humanisms of the Anglo-American humanist movements. Then there are the reactions to such humanism: the anti-humanisms of the 20th Century (Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan...) and the post- and trans-humanisms of the 21st.

Still, humanism is also a broad term in culture, or rather a synthesising category that perhaps better than any other expresses the self-consciousness of European civilisation as a whole. As such, humanism is not only a term representative of a given historical period or intellectual current: in this latter meaning, humanism does not rest on the same taxonomic rung as, for instance, Romanticism or the Enlightenment (that is why - I suppose - in Italian we speak of *umanesimo* instead of *umanismo*). What we mean here is a term that serves as catalyst for a *Weltanschauung*, an *ethos* that implies social and political institutions of a certain shape. Humanism is at this point nothing less than an eponim for European¹¹ - and, in consequence, Western - civilisation. That is how it could be identified as the fulfilment of Western metaphysics dating back to Plato (Heidegger).¹² Accordingly, humanism is here understood as that generative category which - for better or worse - gave rise to a particular civilisation: *i.e.* to a culture and its social and political institutions.

Other than being a historical/historiographical and cultural term, humanism also carries axiological meaning; as such, it has performed the role of a regulative ideal. It is no coincidence that at each and every crisis that European civilisation has undergone, humanism has been evoked as a synthesising term standing for

¹¹ See G. Tognon, *Humanism. Reflections on an Eponymous Idea*, in: *Contemporary Humanism - Questioning an Idea: A Time of Fragility, a Time of Opportunity?*, "Munera", special issue, 2019 (forthcoming).

¹² See M. Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit mit einem Brief über den "Humanismus"*, Francke, Bern 1947.

“civilisation” in a time of barbarism. This has been the case with Italian humanism in the aftermath of the crisis of medieval Europe, and afterwards with the various humanisms of the 20th Century, in the wake of the two World Wars.

Now, these three applications of the term “humanism” – the historical, cultural and axiological – do not belong to the same plane.

In its historical and historiographical meaning, the term “humanism” has a clear and definite referent: precise moments in the intellectual history of Europe and the West. This is no longer the case, however, when the term is applied in the broad cultural sense, and even less so in its axiological meaning: it is worth noticing that in these cases “humanism” functions more as a mythical than logical concept; indeed, it allows no reduction to a Cartesian clear and distinct idea. “Humanism” is *de facto* irreducible, inasmuch as it is polysemic and volatile: it fluctuates with time, with transition from one language to another, and even within the boundaries of a single language.¹³ But it is also *de jure* irreducible, given that “humanism” is not understood here as a descriptive or informative term (conveying some specified conceptual contents), but rather as a regulative ideal that aims to establish a space of reciprocal recognition and a just order of relationships (relationships with ourselves, between subjects, with the world and with what is perhaps beyond the world or at its foundation).

This is a point well appreciated by Foucault: humanism is, to all effects and purposes, a myth.¹⁴ Foucault’s analysis is well known: it is not only that the human ceases to be the object of scientific enquiry, given that human sciences deal with other things (essentially: with structures).¹⁵ It also claims that we can do without “the human” as a moral concept.

The idea of humanity and the category of the human are – within Foucault’s perspective – a historical invention. Accordingly, the anti-humanisms of the 20th Century represent a radical and wholesome attempt to deconstruct humanism (certainly no attempt to affirm the inhuman is meant, as the term might mislead-

¹³ See V.R. Giustiniani, *Homo, humanus, and the Meaning of Humanism*, “Journal of the History of Ideas”, 46:2 (1985), pp. 167-195.

¹⁴ See “Qui êtes-vous, professeur Foucault?”, in M. Foucault, *Dits et écrits (1954-1988)*, tome I (1954-1975), Texte n. 50, pp. 601-620 (or. ed. in P. Caruso, *Conversazioni con Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan*, Mursia, Milano 1969, pp. 91-131).

¹⁵ See “Qui êtes-vous, professeur Foucault?”, cit. In the same lines M. Blanchot: “L’homme est absent des sciences humaines. Cela ne veut pas dire qu’il soit éludé ou supprimé. C’est au contraire pour lui la seule manière d’y être présent d’une manière qui ne fasse de ce qui l’affirme ni un objet – une réalité naturelle quelconque –, ni une subjectivité ou encore une pure exigence morale ou idéologique : d’une manière donc qui ne soit ni empirique ni anthropomorphique ni anthropologique” (M. Blanchot, *L’athéisme et l’écriture, l’humanisme et le cri*, in Id., *L’Entretien infini*, Galimard, Paris 1969, pp. 373ss).

ingly suggest), finally to arrive at Levinas's conclusion: it is impossible to speak of the human considered as an individual of a kind.¹⁶

Foucault however goes further and points out how the category of humanism had served to justify a most unlikely array of historical endeavours (l'«humanisme a constitué d'une certaine manière la petite prostituée de toute la pensée, de toute la culture, de toute la morale, de toute la politique des vingt dernières années», as he stated in 1967).¹⁷ According to Foucault, humanism's original sin rests in providing humanity with the pretence of *telos*, an alleged intrinsic and essential purpose. The aim of such a pretence would be to provide legitimacy to humankind's inherent capacity for control (since humans are able to exercise control, this must fundamentally be directed towards some end).

However, in doing so humanism would render humanity some "mauvaises services"¹⁸ (here Foucault stumbles upon Heidegger's own conclusion on the various -isms: "is the damage caused by all such terms still not sufficiently obvious?").¹⁹ Today however – continues Foucault – "l'humanité commence à découvrir qu'elle peut fonctionner sans mythes".²⁰ Humankind can deal without myths: since the world – as we have seen – keeps going once the idea (the myth) of God is removed, why shouldn't the idea (the myth) of the human follow suit?

Even though Foucault is very persuasive in denouncing the role "humanism" has played in legitimising everything, left and right, his argument is lacking at least at one point. I am not making reference to the remark that the world would continue to work without the idea of the human, just as it has continued to work without the idea of God: here I limit myself to a reference to De Lubac's remark about the drama of atheist humanism, namely that man is quite capable of organising the world without God – but ultimately only against himself.²¹

Another point seems to my mind more interesting: Foucault's statement that humanity is able to function without myths. I wonder if this claim is not itself a myth, and thus the outcome of a flawed reasoning: the myth of a humanity devoid of myths. Is it actually the case that we can do without myths and a symbolic order within which to think and live? Is it not the case that a functionalist reason requires

¹⁶ See Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Fata Morgana, Montpellier 1972, p. 107 n. 5: "De la critique de l'humanisme résulte peut-être le plus clairement "l'impossibilité" de parler de l'homme en tant qu'individu d'un genre".

¹⁷ See "Qui êtes-vous, professeur Foucault?", cit., p. 616.

¹⁸ See "Qui êtes-vous, professeur Foucault?", cit., p. 616.

¹⁹ See M. Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit mit einem Brief über den "Humanismus"*, cit.

²⁰ See "Qui êtes-vous, professeur Foucault?", cit., p. 620.

²¹ See H. De Lubac, *Le Drame de l'humanisme athée* (1944), in H. De Lubac, *Œuvres complètes*, II, Cerf, Paris 1998, p. 10 (" Il n'est pas vrai que l'homme, ainsi qu'on semble quelquefois le dire, ne puisse organiser la Terre sans Dieu. Ce qui est vrai, c'est que, sans Dieu, il ne peut en fin de compte que l'organiser contre l'homme").

a symbolic order of meaning, one established on the basis of founding myths, in order to function? To rephrase: is it not the case that in the absence of a preceding, pre-established, space of meaning reason itself cannot operate? Certainly, all is well from the perspective of rational calculation – the quantitative measures – but what is missing is the treble clef that allows us to read and produce the music. Without a symbolic order, humankind lapses into “bare life” (Agamben): in consequence an abstract category of universal “human” inevitably triggers the expulsion and suppression of diversity (Baudrillard).²² Then, it can easily occur that *Cuique suum*, the Latin principle of justice, granting to each their own, translates into *Jedem das Seine*, the motto placed over the entrance of Buchenwald concentration camp: *summum ius* turning into *summa iniuria*. On the face of it, all is ordered and everyone is allotted their proper measure. But is everything indeed put in order?

It is no coincidence, I said, that humanism has been present on the intellectual scene of every cultural crisis: so it was each time “civilisation” needed to be reasserted against “barbarism” (here I employ the terms in their axiological meaning).

In the axiological sense, “civilisation” – as Tzvetan Todorov pointed out²³ – stands for a recognition of the humanity of all human beings, including those belonging to a civilisation other than one’s own. Civilisation is an acknowledgement of a plurality of modes (as many as there are civilisations) within which humanity itself might be accomplished. Barbarism, on the contrary, is disinclined to make this acknowledgment. Each time the acknowledgment of a humanity other than my own becomes less obvious, a form of humanism – here I employ the historic meaning of the term – rises to its defence. When it rises, it does so not as a historic category charged with a specified content, but in axiological and mythical guise, inclined to reconcile a given civilisation – be it even Europe, the very civilisation that gave rise to humanism – with the regulative ideal of “civilisation”.

The idea of “humanity” and the civilisation that constitute the regulative ideal of humanism – the term used here in its axiological meaning – are they historical inventions, mythical constructs? I believe that there can be no answer other than the affirmative: indeed, they are. Here the deconstructing efforts of anti-humanism may be considered a blessing.

The question is whether we should – or indeed we can – do without a symbolical and mythical space of this kind. Mythical does not mean false, i.e. the opposite of “true”: if a mythical story is not true, it is so because it is not meant to be an account of the facts in a hypothetical past, a report providing empirically verifiable data. What myth lays out is rather the *truth* of history: a truth wherein everyone can recognise themselves and find a pattern on which to found fair relationships

²² See J. Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Gallimard, Paris 1976, ch. V.

²³ See T. Todorov, *La peur des barbares. Au-delà du choc des civilisations*, Éditions Robert Laffont, Paris 2008.

(relationships with themselves, with others, with the world and beyond). In this sense, terms like “humanism” and “humanity” are to all effects mythical categories that aim to establish a symbolic space where recognition and a just order of relationships are made possible.

HUMANISM OF STRENGTH AND HUMANISM OF FRAILITY

Humanism understood as an axiological category has performed at least two fundamental historical functions. The first has been to legitimise anthropocentric claims, indeed to vindicate the pretence to strength and power of that being which – in every respect – claims to be master of his own house.

The second function is that of instituting a human measure that would allow for the defence of the weakest among human beings: the most vulnerable, those without power and subjected to the power of others. Not, then, a gesture for the preservation of human hubris, but for the preservation of the lowest: the humble, the defenceless.

The first function traditionally performed by humanism – that of vindicating human ambitions – has meanwhile become unfeasible. Some of the moral claims traditionally put forward by humanity, first at the European, then the Western, finally the global level, are being contested from many standpoints, and often with good reason. Among them are: the claim to dominance over nature and that of moral superiority over other animals. There are those who arrive at the conclusion that a world without humans – a world *free* of humans – would be a better world. This is an outlook certainly contrary to that traditionally championed by many forms of humanism,²⁴ but one cannot deny it at least some persuasive force. The ecological crisis is an irrefutable argument in its favour.²⁵

The second function, on the other hand, has been that of securing a boundary from below. This is to say that humanism has traditionally operated as a synthesising category at the centre of a constellation of notions such as, amongst others, “human dignity” and “human rights”. In principle, these are terms universally shared, but as their material and substantial content is not self-evident (any longer), they need to be continuously renegotiated.

Such semantical and material uncertainty constitutes a point of vulnerability, but one altogether inevitable, given the very object is by nature impossible to pin down: the measure of said dignity is immeasurable and cannot be met otherwise than by approximations and recourse to the symbolic space of myth.

²⁴ See R. Brague, *L'humanisme est-il en voie de disparition ? Entretien avec Rémi Brague*, “Cités”, n. 55, 2013, pp. 93-104.

²⁵ See: V. Höfle, *Philosophie der ökologischen Krise. Moskauer Vorträge*, C.H. Beck, München 1991.

Once again: can we do without such a space? The category of “natural law” serves, to my mind, as a good example: it is a quintessentially mythical category, impossible to implement as a descriptive, clear and articulate idea. But then again, can we do without this kind of regulatory ideal when it comes to asserting the safekeeping of the weakest, namely those not perfectly corresponding to the canonical image of an adult, healthy, civilised, preferably male human being?²⁶

A serving of healthy humility towards the anthropocentric, naive and conceited humanism that strives to push the boundaries of our species ever higher and beyond, is certainly advised. At the same time, a principle is called for that would allow the defence of human boundaries from below: a human measure commensurable with those incapable of fending for themselves.

We are more conscious than ever of how the ecological crisis is bound up with the manifold threats to human dignity, and of their shared foundation in the exaltation of profit as the sole measure of value, with the resulting leftovers – human leftovers included – deemed inadequate, or at any rate not useful for the purpose of ever enhanced performance.²⁷ A reconsidering of anthropocentrism and the defence of human dignity are not only not at odds with each other, but on the contrary, prove mutually supportive. Can humanism lay the foundations for a mythical space capable of supporting a principle of this kind? There is no concealing the fact that the term itself is somewhat worn-out.

If, as stated, humanism – in the cultural sense – is eponymous of a particular civilisation, a civilisation that in humanism – here in the axiological sense, *i.e.* in a recognition of the common humanity – has rediscovered the proper measure of Civilisation, one cannot turn a blind eye to how humanism has today become the catchword that provides legitimacy to a globalised universalism that conceals forms of cultural homogeneousness and economic imperialism.

So: is the mythical and axiological instance traditionally represented by the category of humanism still relevant today? Or are we dealing here with a legacy of solely historical and cultural import, no longer practicable at the end of eurocentrism and the political, scientific and technological supremacy of the West? And therefore a fetish that we ought to liberate ourselves from?

HUMANISM, CIVILISATION, CULTURE

There are two distinct but inseparable claims related to humanism in the axiological sense: the recognition of the shared humanity of all human beings (the uni-

²⁶ In this regard, D. Bonhoeffer’s path is emblematic: facing Nazism, he recognises the need for such a claim as a “natural law”. See D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, (Werkausgabe, 6), Herausgegeben von I. Tödt, H.E. Tödt, E. Feil, C. Green, Kaiser Verlag, München 1998², pp. 163-217 (“Das natürliche Leben”).

²⁷ See Francis, *Laudato si’* (2015).

versal claim) and the nature of this humanity revealed as a task (the particular claim). So, shared humanity as a task falling to each human being, to be carried out in the practice of a free “innovative creativity”.²⁸

In this sense, affirming a formal universalism doesn't suffice: certain material conditions are required for common humanity to be effectively – ergo freely and creatively – realised in each and everyone.

This duality calls for an alliance between the humanist claim and particular cultures, which perform an irrefutable anthropogenic and humanising role, without which free creativity may not be exercised. Humanism's universal claim – the recognition of the shared humanity, the realisation of which is a task falling to every human being – cannot develop in opposition to particular cultures. It can only do so within a “polar opposition” with them, as an axiological and mythical – rather than logical and rational – claim of Civilisation with which every single culture and civilisation can and must be confronted, and measured.

Without culture there is no humanity: a human being stripped of their proper culture is in fact reduced to a disposable “bare life”, excommunicable from humankind. Yet every culture is itself a means to humanisation only on condition that a universal – axiological and mythical – point of reference delivers it from the temptation of narcissistic leaning.

The humanist claim of which we speak should not be mistaken for a dissolving of cultures into conforming universalism. It acts, rather, as every culture's internal spur: as an axiological criterion and a stimulus to openness to the other. In this respect the historical path of humanism – meaning a cultural category – seems to me emblematic and paradigmatic. Traditionally the edifice of humanist culture is traced back to a juncture of Athens, Rome and Jerusalem: Greek philosophy, Latin juridical culture, Judeo-Christian theology. However, these sources require complementing with a few others: the doctrine of good and evil from the Persian tradition, the idea of love in the tradition of the Arab poets, the mysticism derived from Celtic tribes, not to mention the great contributions of the modern era.²⁹

The historical course of humanist culture – and we operate still within the cultural sense of the term – seems thus to provide arguments against the notion of an inevitable clash of civilisations³⁰ and in favour of the notion of inevitable fertilisation between civilisations. A fertilisation which we observe even today, but which requires an axiological standard of a mythical, not only logical, order – that is the

²⁸ See J. Kristeva, *Oser l'humanisme*, “Revue des deux mondes”, septembre 2011, pp. 79-102: 88.

²⁹ See T. Todorov, *La peur des barbares. Au-delà du choc des civilisations*, cit., p. 284, which in this regard takes inspiration from Denis de Rougemont's thought.

³⁰ See S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1996.

reference to the ideals of humanity and of civilisation, the two building blocks of humanism in the axiological sense.

Clearly, the encounter with the other – be it the individual or a culture – intimidates, and intimidates in as much as external otherness intensifies the hidden otherness inherent to each individual and culture. The external renders the internal substantial and puts it forward.

The sinister other, the disturbing and alarming stranger resides within us: this is the lesson of Erasmus's praise of folly.³¹ The *concordia* pursued by Italian humanism was not a form of homogeneity, but rather an acceptance of the internal otherness constituting our humanity, that which – following Romano Guardini – we may call the dynamic and oppositional structure inherent in reality.³²

Humanism, then, not as a universal claim of reason in which particular cultures are overcome for the sake of a common, abstract humanity, but as recognition of the task of humanity, a task to be carried out in its multiplicity with innovative creativity, a task that begins with the acceptance of otherness and the plurality inherent in each individual and every culture.

THE BOUNDARY AND ITS BEYOND

The regulative ideal, insofar as it is a mythical reference, remains ultimately unavailable and requires constant reworking and reacquisition. Given humanism's many past shapes and guises – here the category is employed in the historic and historiographic meaning – the anthropocentric route is barred to us today. The three blows to our narcissism (Copernicus, Darwin, Freud) and the teachings of the masters of suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud) have by and large been recognised as irreversible gains to the consciousness of present-day humanity. The human being is aware of not being the master even of his own house. The awareness of this irrevocability, asserted by the advocates of 20th century anti-humanism, was also shared by one of the champions of humanism, Maritain: “Le malheur de l'humanisme classique est d'avoir été anthropocentrique, et non pas d'avoir été humanisme.”³³ There can be no doubt that only non-anthropocentric humanism can come into question, if one is to speak of humanism at all.

This could be a post-humanism of a new meaning, namely: not the overcoming of the traditional boundaries of the human by means of techno-scientific progress,

³¹ On Erasmus and the paradigmatic import of his thought, see C. Ossola, *Erasmus nel notturno d'Europa*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2015.

³² See R. Guardini, *Der Gegensatz. Versuche zu einer Philosophie des Lebendig-Konkreten*, Mainz, Werkkreis im Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1925.

³³ J. Maritain, *Humanisme intégral. Problèmes temporels et spirituels d'une nouvelle chrétienté* (1936), in J. et R. Maritain, *Œuvres complètes*, vol VI (1935-1938), Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse - Éditions Saint Paul, Fribourg-Paris 1984, p. 322.

but the overcoming of traditional anthropocentrism typical of so many past forms of humanism – here in the historical sense – and, eventually, the overcoming of the opposition between humanism and anti-humanism. Such a post-humanism would take shape as a humanism that subjects its mythical and axiological claim to the scrutiny of a deconstructionist and non-anthropocentric anti-humanism.

This outlook offers two competing understandings of post-humanism, that is two possible destinies for humanism. The ground of contention is that of the symbolic space of incommensurability inherent in the human measure and its underlying mythical narrative.

One possible post-humanism pursues, in continuity with the 18th-century philosophical notion of perfectibility, the utopia of the infinite enhancement of the human: this is the myth of an available infinity as an open-ended conquest. What we are dealing with is a negative take on the very limits of the human condition: limits understood as obstructions to a human measure that will not allow itself to be measured or constrained to a benchmark. Within this outlook, the default shape of post-humanism is trans-humanism.

Another possible post-humanism is that which, having incorporated the anti-humanist antithesis, continues the quest for a non-anthropocentric humanism, that is a humanism which rather than dismissing the boundaries, accepts and values them as prerequisite to anthropogenesis.

Post-humanism assumes here the guise of a humble humanism that relinquishes the infinite surpassing of boundaries and instead perceives the discontinuity they cause as the possibility for what Michel de Certeau called instituting rupture (*rupture instauratrice*):³⁴ boundaries as a rupture that opens and allows us to be.

Post-humanism of the first kind remains enclosed within the symbolical and mythical space of gnosticism that subterraneously cuts through the entirety of Western culture, from orphic myths to Descartes and passing through Plato. This is a mythical *imaginarium* wherein the body amounts to pure *res extensa* that confines and checks the infinite prospects of the mind, i.e. pure *res cogitans*.

Within this outlook, post-humanism takes the shape of a trans-humanism understood as victory over the body and an overcoming of its limitations: ultimately, a victory over death.

Post-humanism of the second kind occupies instead the symbolic space of a wise humanism that does not renounce human enhancement and the betterment of material conditions that it allows, thanks to technical and scientific progress. But, at the same time, this is a humanism that recognises that mankind's need to "transhumanise" arises from the experience of boundaries, from a want that belongs exclusively to the human: not to the animal, not to God. This is the symbolic space of accepted and not dislodged boundaries that allows for a dynamics of longing for the beyond.

³⁴ See M. de Certeau, *La Faiblesse de croire*, Seuil, Paris 1987, pp. 183-226.

The aim here is not to juxtapose two post-humanisms, one eliminating all limits and death, and another, the ingenuous, seeking them out. The thing is rather to imagine a humanism that – having worked through the grief for lost anthropocentrism: being “post” with regard to traditionally anthropocentric humanism – has discovered that boundaries certainly constitute an obstacle, but they also constitute the symbolic space that allows for the manifestation of a surplus necessary to human life.

The experience of boundaries reveals that the human measure belongs to an order of incommensurable excess. It is not by chance that one of the meanings of the term “humanus” is “benevolent”.³⁵ The word belongs to a sphere that moral tradition refers to as supererogation: the domain of complimentary surplus. An excess not owed, and yet required for a fulfilled human existence: a sphere of indispensable and incessant symbolical exchange of giving and receiving, not a commercial exchange, but neither a simply disinterested one.³⁶

The saint and the hero are the two emblematic figures embodying this human paradigm,³⁷ which we may consider a trans-humanism that does not lift the boundaries, but recognises them and tends to the surplus inscribed in them.

TO DARE HUMANISM?

To conclude: is “humanism” an ambiguous term, a fetish signifier? Likely so, but – as I hope to have shown – what we are dealing with is a term conveying mythical and axiological reference that we cannot simply do without: not to make our self-esteem great again (as the populist rhetoric of our time would like us to), but as the claim of incommensurability and unavailability of the human measure and thus of championing those who are unable to fend for themselves, particularly in dark times (Arendt).³⁸ But also as a reference point for a just order of relationships, founded on a surplus not owed, and yet required.

In this sense we are certainly at liberty to discard the term “humanism”, but we will then be required to find another, one not yet available. In any case, it is not the terminological precision of a Cartesian clear and distinct idea that we need to concern ourselves with. Rather, our concern lies with recovering a symbolic and

³⁵ See V.R. Giustiniani, *Homo, humanus, and the Meaning of Humanism*, cit., p. 168.

³⁶ See M. Mauss, *Essai sur le don*, “Année sociologique”, series II, 1923-24, vol. I.; later in: Id., *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Puf, Paris 1950.

³⁷ See J. Urmsion, *Saints and Heroes* (1958), in: J. Feinberg, (ed.), *Moral Concepts*, Oxford 1969, pp. 60-73.

³⁸ See H. Arendt, *Von der Menschlichkeit in finsternen Zeit. Rede über Lessing*, Hauswedell, Hamburg 1960; English Translation, *On Humanity in Dark Times. Thoughts about Lessing*, Harcourt Brace, New York 1968.

mythical space that would allow for the unfolding and affirmation of a human measure as incommensurable regulative ideal.

Rémi Brague suggests we understand and practice humanism today as “anti-antihumanism”,³⁹ and so his defence of humanism presents itself not in positive, but in oppositive terms. This seems to me an unsatisfactory solution, because anti-humanism – as we have seen – has had and may yet have its merits, and because we cannot renounce something positive, however unclear and indistinct. In this regard it is true that the term “humanism” is “doomed to be a perpetual signum contradictionis”.⁴⁰

To conclude, I am unable to say whether we ought to dare humanism, as Julia Kristeva suggests.⁴¹

We certainly ought to dare.

³⁹ See R. Brague, *Le Propre de l'homme. Sur une légitimité menacée*, Flammarion, Paris 2013, p. 13: “Ce que nous comprenons aujourd'hui par “humanisme” n'est pas une affirmation, mais la négation d'une possible négation. Notre humanisme n'est au fond rien de plus qu'un anti-antihumanisme”.

⁴⁰ See V.R. Giustiniani, *Homo, humanus, and the Meaning of Humanism*, cit., p. 195.

⁴¹ See Kristeva, *Oser l'humanisme*, cit.