

# Beyond Anthropocentric Humanism

## The Potentialities of the Posthuman in Educational Studies

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*Pedagogia e orizzonte post-umanista* is both an insightful and a critical work. It has the merit of bringing to the forefront a theme that received much attention in the late 1980s but then slipped into the background of the Italian philosophical and pedagogical debate. Namely, the question of how to think education, and therefore pedagogy, in light of the profound changes marking our contemporary era. Ferrante asks *how we may think education in all of its complexity* and, above all, how we may think it *today*. He radically poses the question of the “order of discourse” required to formulate a thought that is appropriate for *contemporary educational experience*.

Throughout the entire book, the author presents and discusses a hypothesis in two parts: first, that the contemporary era is characterised by a radical shift in the forms of experience daily engaged in by humans and nonhumans; the second, that this change is mainly due to the exponential increase and diffusion of technology, whose presence and use has transformed all life contexts. Echoing Galimberti, Ferrante claims that “the relationship between the human being and technology has changed both *quantitatively* and *qualitatively* with respect to the past” (14); most importantly, this transformation has modified the way in which human beings relate to themselves, to others and to the world. It is particularly crucial to acknowledge and understand this difference *vis-à-vis* the past when we come to conceptualizing education, the specific form of experience through which beings – human and non, as Ferrante suggests – construct their own form, discover and embody their possibility of being what it is possible for them to be on the basis of what they currently are, give rise to their becoming, and attribute meaning to themselves and that which surrounds them.

According to Ferrante, we need a type of thinking that explicitly describes, processes and reworks contemporary experience. A thought that steers clear of the temptation to mourn for an idealized past. A thought that does not judge the contemporary era, but draws out its characteristics, by being able to describe it: in other words, that contributes to understanding the complex nature of the contemporary era, without overemphasizing one dimension at the expense of others. A thought capable of constructing new categories and, therefore, of supplying tools for working out how we may live and act today, via a redefining of our aims, values, strategies and possibilities.

The paradigm informing the human sciences, and in particular educational science, in the modern age and still today is anthropocentric. In the author's view, such a paradigm does not offer an adequate way of thinking for the contemporary era. He therefore sets out to help his readers grasp the reasons underpinning the crisis of the anthropocentric paradigm: first by delineating and defining this paradigm, then by outlining its structure, limits, contradictions and pragmatic consequences. Ferrante's position is clear. In bringing to light the crisis of anthropocentrism, he does not mean to deny the importance of being human, but to stake out the claim that we should not view being human as the only or best "measure of the world". More specifically, he asks whether it is possible to imagine "a non-anthropocentric humanism": "to affirm the dignity of the human person" and at the same time, "attribute a peculiar dignity to the nonhuman" (38). As he sees it, we need to work out whether and how it may be possible to develop a humanism that is radically open to all forms of difference. To this end, he sees posthumanism as a valuable resource.

Thinking a "non-anthropocentric humanism", Ferrante argues, is a particularly urgent priority for educational science. He meticulously reconstructs the humanist tradition that has characterized Western educational thought, from the *paideia* of the classical era onwards. He provides a particularly acute analysis of the sociocultural effects of the anthropocentric educational model and the categories that characterize the anthropocentric order of discourse in educational science. Above all, Ferrante contends that this way of thinking does not enable us to come to grips with contemporary reality and its constant changes, or with the crisis in education. This is because it does not provide us with the necessary tools for thinking education in itself, as an experience with its own unique attributes that today can no longer be exclusively identified with human beings and their formation.

This train of reflection is preliminary to the second part of the book, in which the author critically explores the posthumanist paradigm as a perspective offering the opportunity to significantly depart from anthropocentrism. He offers a detailed analysis of the impact that posthumanist

perspectives can have on pedagogical knowledge and on our way of thinking about education in relation to today's world.

First, Ferrante sketches out the theoretical reach of posthumanism, clarifying its themes, trends, currents, boundaries, ambiguities, limits and potential, and examining how it differs from the anthropocentric paradigm. Of note here is the distinction drawn between transhumanism and posthumanism: the author provides a thorough overview of the humanist premises of transhumanism; most importantly, he describes its anti-pedagogical imaginary. He clarifies the ontological and epistemological differences between the transhumanist and posthumanist movements, showing that they stem from two radically different paradigms. In sum, he successfully accomplishes his aim of removing all grounds for confusion or facile preconceptions about posthumanism.

This analysis amply justifies him in proposing posthumanism both as "a *point of departure* for rethinking the Western tradition and hypothesizing possible strategies for responding to some of the issues posed by a globalised, hypertechnological, chaotic, unstable world, characterized by violent social and ecological crises" and as a paradigm that "creates the theoretical conditions for redefining pedagogy and education in the technological era" (107).

Ferrante goes on to illustrate the contribution that posthumanism can make to pedagogical thinking. He dwells in particular on the uses that can be made of it and on the main thematic directions that the posthumanist paradigm has made it possible to pursue, with unprecedented outcomes.

What does it mean to suggest that the posthumanist paradigm offers the possibility to think differently? The author is very precise in answering this question. First, posthumanism challenges contemporary pedagogy to "rethink educational practices and knowledge" in light of mutating forms of experience, and to "rethink and adopt a critical perspective on itself and on the existing" (112). Second, it functions as a "cartography of the contemporary world": it allows us to interpret the present, and above all, to "redesign the technological, socio-material and cultural context in which to situate education, helping the subjects of the educational process to more mindfully manage the multiple forms of change assailing their daily lives" (114). Thus, Ferrante envisages posthumanism as helping to orient as well as to describe. Third, posthumanism, as a "crossdisciplinary theory" (116) enables pedagogical knowledge to relate to the other human sciences in innovative ways, providing a metatheoretical framework within which to address both specific themes (e.g., environmental education) and transversal epistemological themes, such as defining the unit of analysis of the various disciplines. In this regard, posthumanism implicitly makes a sig-

nificant departure from the past by proposing a different unit of analysis: specifically, the posthumanist paradigm moves from a focus on the human being per se to a focus on the relationship between the human and the non-human. In the field of education, this involves “exploring the *materiality of educational processes*” (118), as well as extending the semantic and referential field of the concept of agency by following – albeit critically – Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and in particular the work of Bruno Latour.

However, the contribution of the posthumanistic paradigm goes still further. It offers a new way of thinking about key themes and focuses at the heart of the pedagogical debate: these include the question of the subject, human beings’ relationship with nature and with nonhuman animals, valuing and recognizing difference, redefining interdisciplinarity and consequently pedagogical knowledge and philosophy of education, and the deconstruction and reconstruction of concepts such as learning and education in their mutual relations. Nonetheless, Ferrante does not just explore the new perspectives of enquiry that posthumanism potentially opens up. He is also careful to show the limits of the posthumanist paradigm, both in relation to what he believes to be the current epistemological and methodological needs of education, and with regard to some of the most common perspectives of posthumanist enquiry. Posthumanism can mainly contribute at the paradigmatic level, by helping to redefine “the boundaries and axiological and categorial apparatus” of educational science in order to reposition it “in the contemporary world” (145). However, in the author’s view, additional research is required to more fully explore the current identity of pedagogical knowledge, its objects and its potential. The specific materiality that characterizes educational experience radically challenges posthumanism: like any theoretical and paradigmatic perspective, posthumanism cannot be used “as is” to define or resolve the urgent educational themes identified by the author. Posthumanist approaches to empirical research and theorizing need to be concretely put to the test in educational and pedagogical research practices. Effort is required to modify and enrich both the posthumanist perspective itself and its most representative research approaches, such as ANT. For example, educational experience raises the issue of affective, transference and unconscious dynamics: a dimension that would be overlooked if educational events were to be analysed purely within the boundaries of ANT. Similarly, ANT fails to capture the “the intimate structure of education, that is to say, that which makes it a peculiar experience distinct from other experiences” (147). These dimensions pose a challenge for the posthumanist approach, demanding a broadening of its theoretical perspective and of posthumanist research practice.

This leads Ferrante to turn to the work of Riccardo Massa, an educational scientist and philosopher of education, whose premature death in 2000 means that he may only retrospectively be defined as a posthumanist, and only in relation to certain aspects of his thinking. Riccardo Massa's work and the development of his philosophical ideas are of interest to the author in that they bring a radical perspective to bear on the issue of the object of pedagogical knowledge, and conceptualize educational experience in a non-anthropocentric manner. Massa claimed that the object of pedagogical knowledge was not the human being nor still less his or her education, but how education and training are experienced, which he initially studied using the concept of method and methodology before going on to introduce that of the "dispositivo". In Massa's view, education has an intimate structure of its own, deriving from a combination of corporeal, spatial, temporal and symbolic perspectives. A combination that has educational effects on the subjects involved in it, by means of strategies that are not fully controllable and with outcomes that are often unpredictable. In this final part of the book, Ferrante evokes a fascinating prospect: how may the findings of posthumanist studies and research be integrated with the educational perspective of Massa? How may we combine the posthumanist paradigm with Massa's pedagogical epistemology and educational ontology to think education today?

The author's initial answer to these questions is to define a perspective of theoretical enquiry in which pedagogy is conceptualized as a "theory of educational action" (193). A theory that demands a particular focus on the concept of agency and on the need to identify and comprehend, from a posthumanist rather than anthropocentric viewpoint, the "educational agents" that come into play, which may or may not be human beings. A critical and unbiased rethinking of agency, in Ferrante's view, enables the development of a perspective that he terms "posthumanist ecopedagogy", capable of "promoting and diffusing an ecological culture and at the same time working to construct models based on the co-evolution of contexts (physical, natural, symbolic, socio-cultural, and virtual) and the subjectivities (human and nonhuman) making them up" (198).

In advancing this proposal, Ferrante certainly adopts a novel approach to posthumanism and its, albeit theoretical, use. An approach that is of great interest, given the crucial – indeed vital – nature of the themes he addresses in this book.

## REFERENCES

Ferrante, Alessandro. 2014. *Pedagogia e orizzonte post-umanista*. Milano: LED.