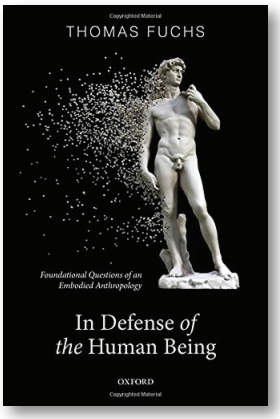
Ann Ist Super Sanità 2022 | Vol. 58, No. 1: 73-74
DOI: 10.4415/ANN_22_01_10

Book Reviews, Notes and Comments

Edited by
Federica Napolitani Cheyne



IN DEFENSE OF THE HUMAN BEING
Foundational questions of an embodied anthropology
Thomas Fuchs
Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2021
272 p.
ISBN-13: 9780192898197
€ 43,70

In the year in which the CEO of one of the largest technology conglomerates in the world announced the development of the first "metaverse ecosystem" in the history of mankind, the reflection on what it means to be a human being and whether it is worth investing resources to try to overcome our human condition seems to become increasingly urgent. The philosophical debate that has sparked out of similar issues (sometimes even referred to as technophilosophies) includes contrasting views. The recent book by philosopher David Chalmers (2022), for example, proposes to think of virtual reality as a genuine reality in which we can live a meaningful life. On the other hand, the new captivating book by the psychiatrist and philosopher Thomas Fuchs brilliantly raises objections and challenges both to enthusiastic technophiles, to supporters of post- or trans-humanist theories, and to the scientific and philosophical assumptions upon which these visions of the human future are built: namely the various forms of cerebrocentrism and reductionist, biological psychiatric orientations.

The author, who is Karl Jaspers Professor of philosophy and psychiatry at Heidelberg University, sharply deals with the most topical and burning debates of our time. The phenomenological cut and the constant reference to phenomenological psychopathology allow to focus on known problems in an original perspective. The general inspiration of this work consists in critically considering those contemporary trends that seriously *question* our conception of the human being: from artificial intelligence to neurobiological reductionism, from neuroconstructivist positions on perception to the new temporality inaugurated by capitalist modernity and the impact of virtual reality on our ability to feel empathy.

The basic thesis, which Thomas Fuchs declines in ever different versions within the book, is that both philosophical thought and psychiatric practice are not going to reach a sufficient understanding of human nature as long as they aspire to reduce embodied subjectivity (both normal and pathological) to lower levels of analysis (i.e., neural activations, disembodied higher-order cognitive processes, brain disorders, etc.). What are the theoretical assumptions from which the author wants to "defend" the human being? In a nutshell, they are identifiable with (1) the scientistic naturalistic view in which there is no place for reflexive subjectivity, as well as (2) biological mechanicism, according to which living beings are better understood as "biological machines controlled by genetic programs" (p. 4) and (3) computational functionalism according to which our mental states are understood in terms of information processing, implementable on different types of hardware, and therefore simulable by AI programs. Fuchs' "defense" could be summarized in the formula that constitutes the subtitle of the book: "Embodied Anthropology". In other words, experience is not multiply realizable; the person's embodied existence is the only plausible image of the human being, and the only one that philosophy as well as psychiatry should depict.

After a programmatic introduction, the first section of the book is devoted to the challenges posed by artificial intelligence, transhumanism, and digital virtualization processes. Chapter 1 contains a critique of the notion of intelligence as it is understood by AI research programs. Chapter 2 shows how transhumanist utopias, aimed at perfecting the deficits deriving from our corporeality, are essentially based on the refusal of the contradictions deriving from our embodied existence. In chapter 3 we find an examination of the effects that virtual interaction has on our capacity of intersubjective attunement with others. The second section of the book is devoted to an extended critique of cerebrocentrism. The reductionist positions coming from neuroscience are taken into consideration (chapter 4), determinism based on natural science is harshly criticized (chapter 5), and an enactivist refutation of constructivist theories of perception is put forward (chapter 6). The last section is dedicated to psychiatry and its role in society. In chapter 8 the author stresses the importance of a subject-oriented psychopathology. The diagnostic process and the treatment of psychiatric disorders should encompass patients' subjectivity and interpersonal relationships: "the research efforts of the discipline must be equally focused on biological processes, psychopathological experiences, psychological-biographical connections, and social interactions, instead of being reduced to analyzing processes inside the brain" (pp. 190-191). Chapter 9 points out a possible change in the conception of dementia based on a phenomenological notion

of the self and personal identity; a concept of personhood grounded in embodiment and intercorporeal interactions allows to consider more fully the identity of the patient even when most cognitive abilities are impaired. Finally, the last chapter deals with the process of derythmitization of social and individual temporality that emerges in globalized capitalist societies. Here a concept of psychiatric treatment as "resynchronization therapy" is proposed.

In sum, the book offers an illuminating examination of the factors that bring the human condition into question. The wide range of topics and a clear and accessible style make it of extreme interest both to readers with a philosophical background and to clinicians, as well as to students in the humanities and sciences.

Jacopo Pallagrosi
University School for Advanced Studies IUSS
Pavia, Italy
jacopo.pallagrosi@iusspavia.it