Monika Banaś[1]

TRANS-HUMANISM'S AND POST-HUMANISM'S *DIALECTICS* BETWEEN TRUTH AND POST-TRUTH[2]

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to invite the reader to reflect on the essence of truth and post-truth in two approaches present in humanities and social sciences: trans-humanism and post-humanism. The notions of truth and post-truth, just like those of trans- and post-humanism, do not have a single defining interpretation. This implies disputes about what truth is and what is the role of man as an being, capable of creative activity, and thus of creating other entities and concepts describing them. However, the problem still remains the doubt as to what extent the ability of creative action allows man to know the truth (alternatively, to establish it), and to what extent it leads us astray. Post-truth emerges as a proposition in the face of the impossibility of reaching a consensus on the former. It is similar in the case of trans- and post-humanism, as concepts offering improved, because more up-to-date, approaches to the exploration of the human being himself, the motives of his actions, and his progress. The issues are presented by means of a critical analysis of selected scientific discourses, including definitions and research approaches that are gaining popularity in academia of the so-called Western cultural circle.

Keywords: post-humanism, trans-humanism, truth, post-truth

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[1] Dr. hab. Prof. JU; Jagiellonian University in Kraków; ORCID: 0000-0002-6542-4053; monika.banas@uj.edu.pl.
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TRUTH AND POST-TRUTH. HUMANS SUSPENDED IN-BETWEEN

Defining truth, almost from the dawn of human history, has been a field of constant dispute. Evidence of this is provided by numerous examples, not only from ancient, but also modern and contemporary philosophy. Due to the limited space of this text, only a few that are mentioned, most characteristic for the epochs in which they were created. Let us begin with the classics.

Aristotle's conception of truth refers to the relation between the cognitive subject and the reality it recognizes. This relationship, conditioned by the dispositions of the cognitive subject to undertake acts of cognition, can result in two states: compatibility or incompatibility of the intellect with the thing being under cognition. Truth is closely correlated with the cognitive process itself, which is not identical for all human individuals. The close relationship between truth and cognition makes the former a multifaceted entity. Depending on the employed dispositions, named by the Stagirite as "senses," "thinking," and "desire," truth reveals different aspects of its essence. Despite its essential multifacetedness, it consists in the agreement between the intellect and the entity/thing (Pride 2013, 12). It is worth emphasizing this feature of truth: congruence, and therefore order, harmony (in the absence of this, we are dealing with falsehood). This conformity occurring in the intellect, manifests itself through spoken judgments, verbalized and formed into sentences. Language therefore plays another key role in the search for truth. Language modifications, especially with regard to the manipulation of meaning, carry serious consequences, "missing" the truth or creating its illusion in the form of the so-called post-truth.

The danger of substituting truth for its absence arises from a number of reasons, including intentional and unintentional ones, when the adjudicating subject does not have sufficient knowledge of the thing. This issue imposes a distinction between two approaches: dianoetic (indirect) and noetic (direct) in arriving at truth (Bubble 2000, 73–74).

"Disinterested love of truth" in Aristotle, according to Władysław Tatarkiewicz, became the basis and leaven for the later achievements of the Stagirite, who left a powerful imprint on subsequent generations of scholars, including our contemporaries (Tatarkiewicz 1998, 105).

Selected thoughts of the Athenian philosopher, developed and deepened, can be found in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. The Italian thinker and spiritualist identifies truth with being, noting at the same time that

cognition of being (thing) is preceded by being (thing) itself. Being is the cause of the cognition of truth, which is a universally real property; it is transcendent. St. Thomas identifies two roads to the one and only truth leading through reason and faith. Indispensable in this journey is the intellect in its equally double aspect, as a practical intellect and a speculative intellect (Solecka-Karczewska 2010). Both serve to discover the truth in its ontic (truth about being) and logical dimension (truth about human cognition of that being).

Cognitive realism in the Thomistic conception was combined with cognitive optimism resulting from the intelligibility of things, i.e. the fact that they are cognizable, they allow themselves to be known because they are logical, ordered, and purposeful. If they are not so, they cannot be known because they are disordered, chaotic, unpredictable, in constant, unpredictable variability (instability). The aforementioned cognitive optimism, while holding out the promise of the possibility of knowing things and the truth, is far from treating the cognitive process as easy and simple. The truth about being is not a simple construct. Its complexity results from the fact that substantial being has many accidental entities that require cognition, which again complicates the whole process of arriving at the truth. Aquinas, however, sees "signposts" that help man follow the right path (the path to truth). This results from the Thomasian concept of locating the thing to be known between two intellects, the intellect of the Creator (the cause of things) and the human intellect, which, thanks to the dispositions given from God, is able to find the truth (Krupińska-Sadach 2018, 301–302). It should be noted, however, that in addition to the intellect, man must have the senses necessary in the process of cognition. The complexity of truth requires it. Through the senses we get to know the accidental qualities of a thing, while through the intellect we get to know its essence. The intellect in understanding and inquiring has the ability to understand principles, including those relating to the First Truth – God. From Him, as the First Truth, all other truths arise (Szymura 2018, 13–14, Belch 2006, 4).

The Christian vision of man, truth and God was in Thomas an attempt to combine the two orders of science and religion. *Ratio* and *fides* can also be seen in Immanuel Kant, but here *fides* would correspond to trusting pure reason, for which the prototype of ideal being – *the prototype* – appears as unconditioned, absolutely necessary. Since God understood in this way is present in pure reason, it is impossible to prove his existence through traditional theology. It is also impossible to prove his non-existence. Pure

reason alone is the solution to this dilemma. According to the philosopher, God – the prototype, the prime cause of all other beings – is present in human thought. Reason is the space where "God – Idea" appears, being an ideal comprehended but not cognized (Surzyn 2014). What, then, would a person need such an ideal for? Primarily to be moral, but also as an idea guiding the logical construction of a system of rational concepts. Kant recognized, as did his predecessors, that truth is the correspondence of cognition with the object (Kant 2001, 207). Nevertheless, it is impossible to define or establish truth, because each object, having specific individual features, depending on the disposition and experience of the cognitive subject, will present the truth only concerning it (the object), and, in addition, referring to a specific moment of existence/being in time of the object and the cognitive subject. Truth and error are located in judgments, which are constructed by intellect and reason. Error arises not from reason itself but from its entanglement with the senses, which are also not the source of error, for they only provide material for judgment. The one responsible for the error is the intellectual illusion resulting from presumption – a provisional judgment (Kant 2001, 208–209). To avoid it, a cognitive individual must be aware of his entanglement between the intellect and the senses and determine the sources of the influence of the senses on the intellect. Failure to do so brings persistence in error and building new, also erroneous, judgments on erroneous judgments. Self-recognition, which was postulated by the philosopher, is difficult also in the modern world, which reaches to the illusion of a superior, unconditioned idea, recognizing it (the illusion) as an ideal, model being.

A significant departure from, or even a negation of, the higher of these approaches was the concept of the supreme goal, of man and of values, as expressed by Friedrich Nietzsche. Life as a goal in itself, superior to other goals, individualistic and relative understanding of happiness, reevaluation of values, creation of a new morality based on strength – these are the main messages of the German thinker. As a classical philologist, he was familiar with the metaphors and allegories commonly found in the writings of ancient Greek and Roman authors. From them he drew patterns of interpreting the world, which appeared to him as conventional, illusory, relative, resulting from individual, personal perceptions and interpretations. What was real was what was useful, what served to satisfy the ambitions and aspirations of a strong individual, convinced of his superiority on the basis of such features as domination, egoism, egocentric utilitarianism. The ability

to empathize, pity, care beyond the circle of loved ones, was a trait of weak individuals, lacking the leadership, superior element given to superhumans. The morality of masters should reign over the morality of slaves, only then the world will be properly ordered. Since there are more slaves than masters, the weak morality of the former dominates the world, distorting its proper, desired image (Nietzsche 1999, Tatarkiewicz 1998, 164–168). The revaluation of values correlated with the new, inverted morality was coincident with the complete negation of God. In his philosophy, the mortal Nietzsche "put to death" God, thus negating any objective truth, whose traces were tried to be found by thinkers such as Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant. The replacement of the Christian God by a man with extraordinary qualities of will, pride and strength became a method justifying the construction of concepts and ideologies based on the uncritical apotheosis of egoism and the absolute negation of everything that is weak because it is Christian. The concept of the Übermensch opened up to him the possibility, not only of creating, but also establishing new rules.

The presented, necessarily abbreviated, selected concepts of truth, allow us to turn our attention to another phenomenon, post-truth, well "established" in contemporary cultures and societies, not only in the so-called Western civilization circle. This phenomenon has been presented on the example of two significant trends: trans- and post-humanism.

HUMANISMS

Post-humanism has been present in the discourse of Western civilization since the late 1970s, generating diverse reactions, from extreme criticism to enthusiastic apotheosis (Hassan 1977, 1987). It is often confused with transhumanism, although these are two distinct orders of thought, entailing specific actions in the scientific, political, or cultural spheres. Transhumanism sees the human being as a being in a constant state of becoming someone new, different, better, in transition. At least, this is and should be the goal – the elimination of basic human limitations – physical, biological, moral, ethical, etc. Julian Huxley, one of the pioneers of the trend expressed his hope and belief by writing:

> (...) I believe in transhumanism: once there are enough people who can truly say that, the human species will be on the threshold of a new kind of existence,

as different from ours as ours is from that of Peking man. It will at last be consciously fulfilling its real destiny (Huxley 1957, 17).

This can happen only on the way of scientific development and technological progress, engaged in the process of improving man, making him stronger, physically and intellectually fit, free from disease and disability, infirmity, old age and perhaps even death. Aubrey de Grey, believes that aging is in fact a disease that should be prevented and even treated, that is, undoing the effects (de Grey 2015). The British scientist is one of many representatives of transhumanism as the right path in human evolution. An evolution aimed at the self-creation of humanity. A similar position is taken by Nick Bostrom, a Swedish philosopher, one of the most active promoters of transhumanism in the 21st century. In an essay on transhumanist values, he points out the possibilities and still present limitations of achieving the goal. According to Bostrom, it is a matter of time when humanity will solve the above challenges through biotechnology, nanotechnology, genetic engineering and artificial intelligence (Bostrom 2005).

One example of a practical, and apparently successful, use of transhumanist postulates is Kevin Warwick, who specializes in biomedical engineering, cybernetics, and artificial intelligence. Described as one of the first cyborgs, he has used his body for experiments in BCI, the creation of the Brain-Computer Interface (BCI). The Cyborg Project, started in 1998 and continued in subsequent years, was to see how well the human body would accept subcutaneously implanted micro-transmitters (the FRID technique) capable of sending and receiving signals from electronic devices in the laboratory, responsible for room temperature, opening and closing doors, turning lights on and off, etc. The positive results of the experiment made it possible to apply the above solutions in the case of people with damaged nerve connections, people who are partially or completely paralyzed (e.g. the cases of Jesse Sullivan, Claudia Mitchell, Cameron Clapp).

Two decades later, the method of implanting implants concerns completely functional people. Services offered by companies such as the UK's BioTeq or Sweden's Bioxac deal with the commercial embedding of chips containing access codes for payment cards, bank accounts, medical IDs, electronic devices, etc. The rapidly growing number of purchasers, interested in improving their functioning in the increasingly cyberneticized world, forces the need for market regulation of this type of goods and

services. In the case of the European Union, the issue has been addressed, among others, in a 2018 document commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) (document *The Use of Chip Implants for Workers*). The document points out the broad potential of this type of practice, however, with a high risk of uncontrolled and unauthorized use of data, including data on health status, type of insurance, data covered by professional secrecy, etc.

The so-called leakage of sensitive data, despite the current GDPR (The General Data Protection Regulation) is not uncommon, as evidenced by the cases of services and entities like Gmail, Facebook, Sony Pictures, Adobe, eBay, Heartland Payment Systems, UniCredit, (PZN Magazine, CyberDefence24 2019). Even more so, it is arguable that access to data stored in personal microchips is more vulnerable to surveillance.

Legal issues are important, as are moral and ethical questions. British philosopher, Max More in defining transhumanism juxtaposes it in a triad with humanism and post-humanism. He sees these three orders as interrelated, based on trust in human reason, hope in the human capacity for unlimited development and progress, and above all, freedom from God as:

> (...) a primitive notion invented by primitive people, people only just beginning to step out of ignorance and unconsciousness, people only just beginning to step out of ignorance and unconsciousness. God was an oppressive concept, a more powerful being than we, but made in the image of our crude self-conceptions (More 1996).

The hope for man, then, is man himself by unleashing his own intellectual and organizational potential. More's appeal resounds even more emphatically in the conclusion of the essay *Transhumanism. Towards a Futurist Philosophy*, in which the author writes:

> Humanity is a temporary stage along the evolutionary pathway. We are not the zenith of nature's development. It is time for us to consciously take charge of ourselves and to accelerate our progress. No more gods, no more faith, no more timid holding back. Let us blast out of our old forms, our ignorance, our weakness, and our mortality. The future is ours (More 1996).

More's message, especially the last sentences of the passage cited above, reverses the order of thinking about human beings as unlimited, nonweak, and immortal. Transhumanism, More argues, is a path to

a posthuman form of humanity: "Transhumanism is a class of philosophies that seek to guide us toward a posthuman condition." (More 1996).

Transhumanism, composed of many strands, has according to More a leading version, extropianism, emphasizing goals such as self-transformation, dynamic optimism boundless expansion, spontaneous order and intelligent technology. Thus defined, the horizon of the self-creating, human-in-transition subject is to lead to freedom in the full sense of the word, happiness understood as joy, longevity determined by the will of the individual, and total dedication to reason, logic, science and critical thinking.

Heterogeneous understandings of trans- and post-humanism can be seen in many writings of contemporary authors. Added to this are issues related to the uneven interpretation of the ideas or postulates contained in these publications. For example, post-humanism is commonly associated with the end of humanity as such. Especially reading the Polish translation of Francis Fukuyama's book, *The End of Man. The Consequences of Biotechnological Revolution* invites us to do so (Fukuyama 2004). Meanwhile, the title of the original does not indicate the end at all, but rather the beginning, and not of someone, but of something: *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (Fukuyama 2002). It can be assumed that the purpose of the above mentioned modification of the translation of the title, was strictly marketing publicity of the issues and a reference to another publication of this author about the end of history: *The End of History and The Last Man* (Fukuyama 2006). The ominous-sounding title of the Polish edition of *Our Posthuman Future…* loses its force in the context of Fukuyama's own revision of the conclusions contained in *The End of History*. Leaving aside the aforementioned publications, the end of man does not have to come in the foreseeable future unless he himself contributes to it. Paradoxically, hope in such a context may lie in post-humanism.

The prefix *post* points to the state after, and in the word post-humanism to something that comes after the ideological and intellectual current which chose man as the main object of consideration, placing him in the center, according to the Renaissance and later Enlightenment traditions. The eighteenth-century fascination with the human mind, the belief in its unlimited development, and the belief in the growing power of man as both author and creator, further strengthened the anthropocentric view of man.

The need for a critical analysis of humanism, based on the Enlightenment tradition, was raised at the end of the 1970s by Edward Said (Said

1978). He pointed to phenomena such as colonialism, its associated physical and symbolic violence, and the multi-generational destruction of colonized societies. These were derivatives of secular humanism. Thus, to simplify, humanism failed; the human being at its center did as well. This took on particular expression in totalitarian systems. Alexander Solzhenitsyn saw in secular humanism the beginning of Marxism, socialism and communism. He expressed this indirectly in the following words:

> If, as humanism declared, man was born only for happiness – then why would he be born for death? But from the very fact that he is bodily condemned to death, his earthly task is, apparently, more spiritual: it does not consist in delighting in everyday life and the best ways of acquiring goods and then joyfully consuming them, but in the constant performance of a difficult duty, so that the whole path of life becomes a path of moral perfection (translated by MB after Przebinda 1995, 130).

Rejecting the contested part of the heritage of humanism, posthumanists propose a modified set of concepts concerning man – not his end, but a new stage in his development.

Development and progress imply passing through stages, each of which is better than the previous one. Post-humanism, then, would mean not dehumanizing human beings but restoring them to their proper place. This issue is analyzed in detail by Ann Weinstone in *Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Post-humanism*, who emphasizes the posthuman autonomy of beings linked by mutual relations according to the egalitarian principle, as well as the principle of freedom of existence and self-determination. Also relevant here is the principle of creation, including self-creation. (Weinstone 2004, 10–11). Post-humanism, denying the main assumptions of humanism about the human supremacy over everything, the unlimited potential of human thought and the resulting right to omnistate (in the sense of ruling and creating), proposes to see humans as one of many equal beings – entitled to exist. This non-anthropocentric (or post-anthropocentric) view of reality presupposes a shift in focus from man to what lies beyond him. And beyond himself there are many inanimate and animate entities, the latter of which, in some cases, are characterized by intelligence and an advanced disposition to feel and communicate mental states (highly developed mammals, some species of birds or cephalopods like octopuses).

Symbolic for humanism, the drawing of Vitruvian man, dictating proper proportions in classical architecture, provides the message that the

proper measure is man. Thus, man was not only placed at the center, but became the center. Post-humanism in its various variants, more or less orthodox, rejects this position, and as Francesca Ferrando points out, it locates man "alongside" other entities, animate and inanimate, making them all interdependent existences. Hence it is impossible to treat these entities separately, but always in the context of multilateral relations. Importantly, relationships that mutually condition individual entities (Ferrando 2013, 32).

Katherine Hayles, considering the potential embodied in the concepts that make up post-humanism, sees in them threats, but sees many more opportunities for humans as well, especially in the context of human-artificial intelligence relations. Man has a consciousness that follows completely different paths than the hypothetical consciousness of artificial intelligent entities (Hayles 1999, 283–284). Thus, the threat, or as Hayles puts it, "terror," from artificial intelligence in the broadest sense of the term, in order to marginalize the human being, should not be exaggerated. The fact that modern man makes use of highly advanced technological solutions that involve so-called artificial intelligence (e.g., in medicine – assisting in surgeries, diagnosing diseases, developing the composition of medicines, personalization of treatment or gene editing) is evidence that humans have already become posthuman.

Drawing attention to the advantages and wide potential contained in trans- and post-humanistic concepts of perceiving human and non-human reality, combined with a non-anthropocentric view of the world, can provide inspiration for the gradual shedding of man's greatest vices. Among them are: pride, greed, laziness, lack of restraint, egoism, self-centeredness, lack of respect for non-human beings such as animals.

CUL DE SACS

The concepts of trans- and post-humanism quoted above emphasize the ambition of homo sapiens to create and "make" not only himself but also other non-human beings. Man in the light of these approaches becomes a creator. However, one can look the other way at the mentioned orders. A human being in the process of change, in-transition, and a human being who is able to get rid of the egocentric view, who sees the non-selfish value of non-human entities (animals, plants, animate and inanimate nature), as a post-human being can offer himself and the surrounding environment

much more than he has done so far. By including non-human beings in his sphere of care, he can strengthen and enlarge his own abilities, not only in the emotional sphere, but also in the aesthetic and ethical spheres. All of them, especially the last one, are formed through culture promoting values such as empathy, cooperation, dialogue, openness. These values are induced in an individual through upbringing, education and training (*Bildung*). Neglecting these areas, especially when it comes to quality and availability (universality), leads to thoughtlessness, automaticity of choices and pretended responsibility. An individual, community or society acting in this way is reluctant to make the effort connected with reflection, thoughtful choice or responsibility for the effects of their decisions. Why? Because they have not been prepared, taught, and practiced.

Bruce Thornton, analysing the phenomenon of still present evil, despite common education, progress of knowledge and science, points to a kind of self-deception to which man succumbs, putting his hope in his own abilities. The author of *Plagues of the Mind: The New Epidemic of False Knowledge*, emphasizes an astonishing feature of man, who, with persistence, repeats his efforts based on the same assumption – his own limitlessness. Attempts to create an ideal social, political, and economic system, to eradicate injustice, misery, disease, war, and unhappiness, have not yielded the expected results (Thornton 1999). Currently, in the 20s of the 21st century, numerous armed conflicts resulting in suffering and death, are a telling proof of human weakness and inability to control our own instincts, based on primitive emotions. Emotions, especially the negative ones, provide the ground for post-truth, which is an attractive alternative for man disappointed by reason (Thornton 1999, Maddalena and Gili 2020). Post-truth removes facts and their rational, logical analysis to the side, replacing them with free interpretation resulting from the "mood" of the expressing subject. This "mood" is correlated with a certain amount of knowledge that the subject possesses, to which he does not necessarily have to refer. Recalling Dorothy Sayers' words about the danger of the erosion of education (Sayers 1947), we ourselves become recipients and producers of post-truth.

The following excerpts from *The Lost Tools of Learning* are a kind of diagnosis of the state of affairs:

> (...) Have you ever, in listening to a debate among adult and presumably responsible people, been fretted by the extraordinary inability of the average

debater to speak to the question, or to meet and refute the arguments of speakers on the other side? Or have you ever pondered upon the extremely high incidence of irrelevant matter which crops up at committee meetings, and upon the very great rarity of persons capable of acting as chairmen of committees? And when you think of this, and think that most of our public affairs are settled by debates and committees, have you ever felt a certain sinking of the heart?

(...) we often succeed in teaching our pupils "subjects," we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything, except the art of learning (Sayers 1947).

Dorothy Sayers, drew attention to another important issue, namely language, used imprecisely and all too often disorderly:

(...) Have you ever followed a discussion in the newspapers or elsewhere and noticed how frequently writers fail to define the terms they use? Or how often, if one man does define his terms, another will assume in his reply that he was using the terms in precisely the opposite sense to that in which he has already defined them? Have you ever been faintly troubled by the amount of slipshod syntax going about? And, if so, are you troubled because it is inelegant or because it may lead to dangerous misunderstanding? (Sayers 1947).

Through language and the notions established in it, man rebuilds the world, also in the aspect of fundamental notions such as truth. Carelessness about language, about its precision and, above all, about its correct use, leads into areas imitating truth, reflecting it in an impaired mirror. Post-truth as a result of linguistic carelessness, semantic disorder, emotions and imagination, offers seemingly attractive solutions, "easier" because simplified, not requiring thorough knowledge from the recipient. This should be seen as the strengthening of post-truth as one of the elements of contemporary communication, not only in the media sphere, but also in areas such as politics or science. The postmodern motto, taken from Nietzsche, that truth is "a moving army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms," that "truths are illusions," "metaphors that have worn out and lost their sensuous power of expression" (Nietzsche 1993, 189), encourages new paths and new goals. The post-truth man has again come to trust himself and his "new" unveiling as an in-transition being who has left behind what is human.

The Nietzschean vision of man wandering in the darkness of existence, however, has its opposition in the concepts of the philosophers cited at the beginning of this paper, especially St. Thomas Aquinas, who emphasized one way for man and one way to truth. Also for Aristotle, a pagan, truth is one and results from the compatibility (going further: harmony) of an entity and a cognizing subject. Similarly, Kant recognizes the fundamental role of the prototype, absolutely necessary for the formation of rational concepts, essential in the process of cognition and identification of truth.

The postmodern humanities and social sciences, proposing various concepts of interpreting and formating our world, offer many different ways. Many of them are a *cul de sac*, with the guiding principle of post-truth. The same may apply to post- and transhumanism as collections of attractive but also conflicting ideas. Assuming that the world is based on binary oppositions, by choosing the principle of truth, a path without a dead-end can be chosen.

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