

The background of the cover is a complex, abstract geometric pattern of black lines on a white background. The lines form various shapes, including triangles, squares, and rectangles, some of which are nested or overlapping, creating a sense of depth and complexity. The pattern is most dense in the upper left and lower right corners, with more open space in the center.

The Future of the Human

REALIST RESPONSES TO POST-HUMAN SOCIETY: EX MACHINA

Edited by
Ismael Al-Amoudi and Jamie Morgan



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4 Transcending the human

Why, where, and how?

Pierpaolo Donati

What does ‘transcending the human’ mean? The issue

Advanced societies seem to be more and more dissatisfied with the limitations that are inherent in so-called human nature. The premise of this dissatisfaction was clearly expressed by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche in his ‘*Human, all too human*’ (1878), in which he launched the theme of transcending the human for the coming centuries. Since then, it is a matter of fact that the old Western humanism has declined for many reasons that cannot be enumerated here. In principle, this evolutionary trend has to do with a culture that does not accept the limits of the human, which is considered too weak, fragile and perishable, and therefore should be ‘transcended.’ As Simmel has claimed, ‘man is the limited being without a limit’ (Simmel, 1970 : 8).

*What does it mean to transcend the human?*¹ As is well known, today this often means the posthuman, the transhuman, the cyborg. Both post and trans-human rely upon radical technological forms of enhancement.

In this chapter, I argue that post-humanism, understood as a general framework, instead of being a way to transcend the human, is a way to de-humanize it. Although the concept of dehumanization lacks a systematic theoretical basis, I maintain that, in general, it refers to meanings that involve the denial of two distinct senses of humanness: the *characteristics that are uniquely human* and *those that constitute human nature*. The assimilation of the human to animals and plants means denying uniquely human attributes. Giving human beings special skills through particular technologies can strengthen or threaten human nature, depending on how technologies affect the constitution of the human person and her internal as well as external relationality. Most of what we call post-human theories and praxis entail cognitive underpinnings of animalistic and/or mechanistic kinds that do not represent forms of human transcendence, but instead of dehumanization. In the face of the trans-human era, we need new criteria in order to evaluate what humanizes the human and what de-humanizes it.

In my view, what is specifically human can be detected *primarily* in the qualities and causal properties of the social relations activated by people (and not by ‘things’) within a context of social networks, and not in isolation. The

human character of social relation depends on the terms of the relations (human persons),² but does not consist of them. It is *in* the interpersonal relation, *with* it and *through* it, that we can understand what is *indefungibly* human, both in the single person and in social forms. The human, as a reality *in actu*, lies in the intersubjective relation because the latter has qualities and causal properties that are not replaceable by any other entity, be it artificial or belonging to the natural physical world. When someone speaks of the virtues of the fidelity of dogs or the humility of chimpanzees, and more generally of certain animals as ethically superior to the human being, this is to talk about qualities and causal properties that reside in one's mind, not in reality, because human virtues are characterized by moral qualities that non-human animals cannot in any way have. The same holds true for smart robots, androids or other human-like machines.

Three scenarios of human evolution

The two prevailing scenarios

In my view, we have to face two grand scenarios of human evolution, underlying the present cultural dynamics in the globalized world, that implicitly contain two prevailing models of understanding human transcendence. On one side, a (Western) scenario based upon the expansion of science combined with technology, positivistically geared to generating new being with superhuman abilities. On the other side, the (Eastern) idea that world evolution consists in a continuous bringing into existence of what does not exist, i.e. a process in which human transcendence means the construction of a machine of Nothing.³

(a) The first scenario can be exemplified with reference to the *The Onlife Manifesto; Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era*, edited by Luciano Floridi (2015). Since it is assumed that human nature is equal to a *bios* equipped with psychism, what is human in the future will consist of these dimensions enhanced by technology. The distinctions between human beings and other living beings (animals and plants) will be gradually reduced. Human sociability will be transformed accordingly. In this perspective, the human being is considered as *nature's beautiful glitch*, i.e. a beautiful error of natural evolution that has succeeded in surviving and now is evolving into an info-sphere which becomes *anthropo-eccentric* rather than anthropocentric. The basic tenet is that '*more tech makes us more human.*' There is no critical view of the different forms of enhancement, i.e. there is no distinction between those technologies that allow the human person to maintain her identity and those that produce deterioration, such as to break or violate that identity making the human person a slave of the same technologies.

It seems to me that opposing Floridi's view on the basis of a wholly individualistic first-person perspective is not enough, because the latter does not recognize the consistency, needs and uniqueness of the relation between mind and body in each person. If we follow Lynne Rudder Baker,⁴ we could think that the first-person perspective is perfectly compatible with the positivistic

scenario depicted by *The Onlife Manifesto*, once we admit that technology can change the human body without affecting the person's identity,⁵ since the person can still think of herself as herself.⁶ The case of people affected by intellectual disability, and their experience in social life, does not confirm Baker's argument.⁷

I agree with Baker that there cannot be an adequate ontology – an inventory of what really exists – that includes no first-person subjects of experience. But to agree on this perspective does not mean accepting the total splitting of body and mind in a person, because it would mean underestimating the influence of social relationships in the constitution of personal identity. It would mean a return to the Cartesian '*cogito, ergo sum.*' That is, I exist only because I think, whereas my body is held to be a '*res extensa*' (extended thing) possessing the substance of wax. According to this argument, one could never similarly demonstrate the existence of the 'other.' Because of this, humans can know the self and its thoughts, but cannot actually know anything of anything that is not the self.

Human body, mind, and agency cannot be completely separated. Either they have some integration, or the human is no longer such and the action is no longer human. The unity of this difference is given by the energy (*energeia*) proper to their relationship. Splitting body and mind is an abstract operation that can serve to justify an individualistic first-person perspective, defined as 'our inwardness – our abilities not just to think, but to think about our thoughts; to see ourselves and each other as subjects; to have rich inner lives' (Baker, 2002: 370). This is a naïve perspective. It does not see how the relationships between people influence their inner life and does not provide any meaningful account of the real experiences of 'normal' people (not humanoids or robots) in connecting their body and mind in a hyper-technological society. The 'inner' abilities Baker is referring to are strictly dependent on the new communicative environment as well as the possibility of keeping a sense of identity in the connections between body and mind. Baker's first-person perspective seems to be a strategy that proposes to leave the body to technologies and preserve (indeed enrich) the 'reflective mind,' as if the same technologies did not have a powerful influence on personhood through body modifications. In the end, what she calls the 'constitution view' of the human person is *a-relational* (Baker, 2002; 2016) in a double way: because she splits what is human and what is person,⁸ and because she ignores the role of social relations in constituting the way in which the first-person perspective can actually operate.

(b) The second scenario can be illustrated by quoting an evocative paper by Bilimoria (2012), in which he comments on the Vedic texts, where it is written: 'In the beginning, there was neither Non-Being (asat) nor Being (sat)' (RgVeda X.129.1; it is called 'hymn to the creation'). Bilimoria asks: 'what was there, bottomless deep?' Eventually he responds positively. The argument is that

Radical Nothingness ought not to be feared: it may have therapeutic value in the hallowed Wittgenstenian-Yogacārin sense (an antidote for

excessive linguistic conceptualism); it may prove to be a timely yet fairest watchdog on the excesses of Technoscience culture (to which Heidegger similarly drew attention), as well as on fundamentalisms of all varieties the return of religion to the public sphere (despite the Enlightenment's decree), secularism re-seeking the sacred enchantments, and on other attachments to Absolutes.

(Bilimoria, 2012: 528)

Therefore, so he concludes,

let there always be non-being so we may see their subtlety, and let there always be being so we may see their outcome. The two are the same. But after they are produced, they have different names. They both may be called deep and profound.... Deeper and more profound.

(quotation from *Tao-te Ching* by Lao-tzu).

Ultimately, this scenario leads to see the evolution of the whole of creation, and of human evolution within it, as a 'machine of Nothingness,'⁹ in the sense of bringing into existence what does not exist originally. In its naturalistic version it could be, for example, bringing into existence and socially institutionalizing a sexual role which is neither male nor female, as in the case of *fa'afafine* in Samoa culture. In Japanese, Chinese and Indian cultures it can mean to give real existence to certain fictional beings. In this scenario, there is no reason to distinguish between Human and Non-Human, or to think of transcending the human, simply because, to put it bluntly, the religious matrix of these cultures is a sort of naturalistic pantheism.¹⁰ Their transcendental matrix is the same Nature.

The general notion of 'matrix' here refers to a cultural code (symbols and norms for their use) that orients or steers the way in which agents/actors intersect their intents, the situational context in which they find themselves, the meanings they use and the generated effects.¹¹ While the term matrix is generally used in the sense of 'matrix of society,'¹² here I would like to underline its transcendent, metaphysical dimensions compared to a constructionist view of society (see below).

In short, I have chosen to mention these two visions because, although distant and even contradictory in some respects, they seem to merge in globalizing society. What emerges from their mix is a culture that views human transcendence as an endless evolution that is supposed to supersede human deficiencies by mixing natural and artificial elements of all kinds. Western rationalism is mixed with Eastern naturalism within a complex 'nature + technology' in which transcendence is a matter of immanence. The result is a vision of human transcendence as a process of continuous up-grading of life forms which resembles a process of incessant creation of new singularities (see the theory of technological singularity). From my point of view, however opposite, these two scenarios seem to be connected by a subtle and hidden

thread, that of a kind of *vitalism* mixed with some kind of *existential relativism*. What is now called ‘*post-truth politics*,’ is, in fact, a form of *cultural post-rational and post-ethical agnosticism*, since in the digital media ‘anything goes,’ which means that communications do not discriminate between truth and non-truth, and rationality is substituted by emotionality.¹³

A third scenario

The two scenarios just mentioned place human transcendence, respectively, in the total immanence of technological evolution and in an immanent process of creation that makes exist what is not. It is noteworthy that this strategy was adopted by Niklas Luhmann to build his overtly anti-humanistic sociological theory (Donati, 1991: Chapter 4).

I would like to present here a third scenario that introduces another idea of human transcendence. It conceives transcendence as an emerging relation between what exists (immanent reality) and what can be (transcendental reality). What I call the ‘relational order’ is precisely the transcendental, generative mechanism linking immanent and transcendent realities.

Bhaskar’s basic argument, according to which the ‘true’ objects of social sciences are the *real* (although typically unobserved) generative mechanisms underlying phenomena (and not what can be observed and measured empirically), is transcendental in nature, i.e. it implies a transcendental logic array (Bhaskar, 1989). Later on he talked of a meta-reality. Those who deny this possibility end up by erasing the possibility of any sociological humanism. This is what Breslau (Latour’s follower) claims: ‘human agency depends on the agency of things, and the objectivity of the social world depends on the objectivity of the natural world-as we know it, not an unknowable transcendent natural world’ (Breslau, 2000: 305).

I argue that at the beginning of any creation (not only of the original creation) there is not a bottomless depth, but a Being ever able to transcend itself by relating himself to Non-Being. It is in this process of transcendence (emergence) that being and non-being are related, while no one of them can exist *per se* in absolute isolation. The very nature of creation would then consist in a relation that brings into existence what does not exist through a process of emergence.¹⁴ Is it possible to think that what is human can transcend itself in this ‘relational nature’ of creation? The possibility of arguing in favour of a positive answer to this question lies in the social ontology of what we mean by ‘relation’ and ‘relationality.’

The distinction human/non-human as a transcendental relation, and its enigma

To speak of transcendence implies a social ontology of reality. In turn, such an ontology refers to a transcendental reality, and therefore it calls for the existence of a transcendental cultural matrix to which the ontology is closely

connected. When I claim that this matrix is ‘theological’ I do not refer to the dogmatic beliefs of a specific religious faith. I mean the *symbolic code* underlying every great culture or civilization concerned with ultimate realities (Donati, 2010).

It is a matter of fact that any science does refer to such a kind of cultural matrix (see Macintosh, 2016), although very often in an unwitting or unspoken way. All sociologies have a symbolic matrix that depends on a ‘mother-matrix’ where ultimate realities are placed.¹⁵ Many scholars will probably disagree on this claim, but nevertheless they cannot deny that any scientific theory possesses a meta-theory through which it ‘sees’ the world. The founding fathers of sociology, including Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, provide different examples.

For clarity’s sake, let me make explicit what I mean by the term ‘transcendence.’ To me, it means: (i) a *meta-level of reality* that we need to reach in order to get a deeper explanation of what happens in reality or to imagine a reality beyond what exists,¹⁶ by relating to a further ‘layer’ beyond what already exists in an open horizon (matrix) of up-grading orders of realities; (ii) the *necessity of this relation*, as distinct from its contingencies; (iii) whereas ‘necessity’ is a matter of recognition of what is *latent* (hidden, invisible, unmeasurable) as an ‘ultimate reality’ bordering on religion (i.e. what is sacred, and, as such, conferring a *dignity* to every being, in the sense of recognizing that every existing being deserves the *respect* that is due to it according to its own nature). The recognition of the dignity of every entity (in Latin the word *dignus* means ‘a thing or a person deserving respect for its qualities’) marks the boundary between what I call ‘*immanent transcendence*’ (as a product of society) and ‘*transcendent transcendence*’ (as a reality which is not the product of society, because it is pre- and meta-social, it is a meta-reality).

The concept of human dignity can become significant only if one admits the existence of these two orders of reality (what transcends factual reality for emergence from empiricism, and transcendence that does not depend on facts because it is meta-empirical; Bhaskar, 2012), and only if one is able to see and manage the intrinsic relationships of these two orders. In the absence of these conditions, proposals regarding a good society sound in vain or they are reduced to abstract moral and legal notions. This is the case, for instance, with three reports issued in October 2016 by the White House, the European Parliament, and the UK House of Commons outlining their visions concerning how to prepare society for the widespread use of AI. After assessing the merits of these reports, Cath et al. (2017) complain that they do not provide any foresight for describing the future that, as a society, we would like to see. Cath et al. recommend a two-pronged approach in order to steer the process of developing the ‘good AI society.’ According to them, on the one hand, policies should ensure that AI is steered fully towards promoting the *public good*; on the other hand, projects could fruitfully rely on the concept of *human dignity* as the lens through which to understand and design what a good AI society may look like. But these authors have to admit that both

notions of ‘public good’ and ‘human dignity’ are latent realities, irreducible to their immanent definitions in legal or otherwise terms. These realities belong to the relations between the domain of immanent transcendence and meta-reality, i.e. to the latency of society.

This latent reality should not be understood as a *Deus ex machina*. As I will explain later on, such a mechanical God is *not* necessary for the final resolution of human enigmas as in Greek tragedy. The resolution lies in adopting a relational theological matrix that can make us understand the reasons why we need to resort to some kind of transcendence in order to explain the dynamics of social reality without mechanical or deterministic artifices.

The question we are faced with is: what are the relationships between the human and transcendental realities?

We are confronted with a crucial, terribly difficult issue, which is the following: whether or not, to support determinate human-social relations (‘horizontal relationships,’ so to speak), a transcendental matrix is necessary (that is, resorting to ‘vertical’ relations among the stratified layers of reality).¹⁷ If not, why? If yes, which characteristics should it have? More generally, the question is whether or not the *social* ontology of the relations of which we speak (like, for example, love, as an interpersonal relation and not as a subjective sentiment or passion) requires a metaphysics rooted in a theology understood not as a discipline in itself and for itself (based on Revelation), but, in sociological terms, purely as a symbolic cultural matrix.¹⁸ In this chapter I argue that the source of the *meaning of the human- social relation* lies in its transcendental matrix, although the social relation is generated (or is not generated) due to autonomous causes.

For example, everyone agrees that love is essential in the life of a couple or a family. But love must be qualified, it cannot be a relationship whatever: it must be love in a due order and with a ‘deep’ meaning. In such contexts, as an ultimate concern, love needs to be referred to a transcendent symbolic matrix from which it takes its meaning in order to be pursued with appropriate practices. From a Simmelian point of view, which I share, social life has a transcendent character (‘the transcendent character of life’) that permeates even the use of money, given the fact that, in Western culture, mundane monetary interactions and exchanges are related to key religious forms of experience, like faith, unity, and individuality (Silver and O’Neill, 2014).

In this contribution, I would like to say how relational sociology seeks to respond to these basic questions on which the possibility of linking human (social) relations and transcendental (supernatural) relations depends. This possibility, in its turn, depends on the fact of being able to see and manage the enigma of the relation, the enigma that lies in relationality as such (Donati, 2015).

In summary, the problem is the following: whether or not it is necessary – if not, why, and if so, what is it – to resort to a *symbolic matrix* that allows us to face the enigma of the relation in such a way that it is possible to see how and why human relations and transcendental relations are *at the same time*

ontologically connected to each other (not by similitude or metaphor) and *distinct*. This is possible to the extent that the said symbolic matrix assumes that the relational is a transcendental or genetic principle (Debaise, 2012).

The inherent defect of traditional humanism, based upon naïve realism, is that of understanding social relations with others and with the world simply as a ‘manifestation’ of the qualities inherent in the human person and her inner life. Of course, good actions are the energy to break out of ourselves and be prepared to undertake generous tasks which will be of benefit to all. However, to undertake an action on the basis of internal impulses does not mean that a certain result actually follows. It poses the question: are human-social relations simply an expression of inner experiences, of self-consciousness, in one word of the internal conversations of persons? Or are social virtues simply inherent in human nature? In my view, in answering these questions (which are the enigmas that social reality, as an oracle, places before us), we must face unexpressed challenges whose solution lays the path that can lead to a possible neo-humanism open to transcendence.

As is well known, the classical (Aristotelian) conception affirms that virtue does not depend on consciousness (this corresponds rather to the modern, Cartesian or even Kantian, idea), but rather on good action, that is, in accordance with one’s own nature; according to this view, virtue ultimately depends on nature, and, since the nature of the human being is social, the virtuous life is also a life in service of the common good. To my mind, this is a naïve and insufficient view, because the social nature of the person is not enough to explain the common good as relational good. We need many intervening factors between what we call the nature of a human person and its social behavior. The factors become more and more complex as society becomes more and more ‘relational,’ i.e. oriented to free humans from natural limitations and constraints.

The idea that relations are a product of subjective consciousness (the first-person perspective) corresponds to what I call a naïve conception of the social as a human reality not mediated by what ‘is among’ human beings, according to which social relations *and their effects* are a sort of ‘prolonging’ or result of feelings (good or evil), of virtues (or vices), of an autonomous intimate life (or estrangement) of persons.

From the sociological standpoint, this derivation (induction) is problematic, if understood *sic et simpliciter*. Sobriety and the care of Creation, brotherhood, and other social virtues are now, in fact, in crisis precisely because it is no longer sufficient that the person wants them intentionally, whether it be a single person or a ‘moral person,’ like a civil association or social movement.

There is something that lies ‘in the middle’ between the actions of single individuals to which we must give new focus. The social virtues, in fact, differently from the individual ones, refer to social relations. We call them both human, but is there any difference between them? Social virtues do not arise in an immediate and spontaneous way from within people, because, between the interior life of the person and social reality, they emerge (and are

increasingly multiplying) from mediations (made up of relations) that make the immediacy and spontaneity of social outcomes completely uncertain and improbable.

In the new globalized environment, in order to create a certain social relation equipped with certain human qualities and causal properties (for example, in a couple, family, workplace, street, neighborhood, social networks, etc.), it is not only necessary to have a certain disposition and agency of individuals, but another condition becomes just as necessary: namely, that the persons 'see' the specific good (or evil) of that relation, and pursue that relation as good (or bad) in itself.

In the absence of this condition, the individual act, even the most virtuous and best intentioned, can create – albeit unintentionally – a relational evil instead of a relational good. Daily life is full of cases in which people who are in themselves good and close to each other create contentious and negative relationships. What went wrong? From a sociological viewpoint, what did not work was precisely the relation between them. While being good persons individually, they have neither seen nor cared for their relationship, which had decisive influences on themselves and the people around, whether or not they were aware of it.

The fact is that the social relation has its own reality, which is an 'emergent' not automatically derived from the qualities and dispositions of the individuals in relation. This is nothing other than what relational sociology says. From this standpoint the social relation appears as an enigma. In order to cope with it, I argue, we need a transcendental symbolic matrix.

How can we confront the enigma?

Where is the enigma?

The enigma can be simply expressed with this question: why in order to achieve what people love and desire, transcending their constraints and limitations, must they go through the relations with other people especially when new technologies are available that make human relationships unnecessary?

Take the example of Sweden, seen as a type of society that is emblematic of the highest achievements of human progress. As Erik Gandini's docu-essay *The Swedish Theory of Love* (movie, 2015) has shown, Swedes' obsession with independence and self-sufficiency, coupled with a welfare state that provides for every physical need, has produced a lonely and alienated society (it's called 'statist individualism'). Women can have a baby by themselves, sperm-bank donors abound, many people die alone, and state investigators try to find the next of kin of old people who have died alone, and a suicide who wasn't found for years because all his standing orders were paid automatically. It is no coincidence that many young people refuse to live in the world of high technologies and organize camping in the woods to make alternative life experiences in common, take care of each other, relate and be in physical contact between people and with nature.

Why human beings should transcend their limitations and constraints by avoiding to deal with other people, especially when technologies can replace the presence of other human beings? If we know that a particular gene produces aggressive and deviant behaviors, why not avoid having to deal with these relationships by genetic engineering on DNA? Today many jobs and services can be performed by machines: should we look for smart AI robots or humanoids who(?) can work better than humans, by this way avoiding any sort of those interpersonal relations that we know in advance will be deficient and vexatious?

I am thinking of ordinary life, where people rely on technologies that once required human relations. The final horizon is that of a society, as Marx advocated, in which takes place ‘the administration of things by things.’ Of course, he could not speak of robots and cyborgs. We have made a lot of progress. Anormative regulations (Archer, 2016) are amongst those procedural devices that allow present and future social systems to go in that direction.

The modern West has exalted the Subject (the *I*) at the expense of its relations. It thought it could provide social relations at its pleasure. It also thought and thinks in systemic terms, with the ‘system’ being understood as instruments of liberation of individuals. It refused to answer that which I call the enigma of the relation (Donati, 2015a: 125–180), which consists in the fact that *Ego* needs an *Other* who is the source at the same time of support and conflict.

Ego must find something in common with the Other, and at the same time assert the differences with him. When modernity sought to give an answer to this riddle, it created new problems, either because the answer was that of conflict, of division, of confrontation, or stipulated and then betrayed contracts, or because it pursued strategic games that have ended badly. The posthuman exacerbates these problems because, while providing more advanced technologies to *Ego*, it further removes or de-humanize social relations.

The point is that Western culture does not have devices (indeed a cultural matrix) capable of treating the riddle of the relationship, in the sense of knowing how to connect with other people, so to have something in common while accepting the inevitable distress arising from differences. From Schelling and Hegel forward, there have been many attempts to think about this issue. Aside from countless authors from the twentieth century (especially Foucault and Deleuze), it is sufficient to cite Derrida (who sees the difference as ambiguity)¹⁹ and Lyotard (who proposes analyzing *les différends qui nous opposent* through a radical relationism).²⁰ The point is that, in all philosophy and culture that starts from the idealism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and into the present day, the possibilities of conceiving of a relational matrix of society are still missing.

In the end, Western modernity has removed the reality – that is, the proper space-time – of social relations, in order to create an indefinite number of relations, all virtual, all otherwise possible, in order to be able to play with them. Are these, as Jean Baudrillard says, ‘fatal strategies’? Or, are they

‘functional strategies,’ as Luhmann says? Luhmann’s explanation, not surprisingly, goes back to Greek mythology. The solution of the enigma of the relation comes to be represented by Perseus, who managed to survive because he adopted a precise relationist strategy, consisting in avoiding the deadly gaze of the Gorgons (the enigma of the relation) through a continuous change in his position, in such a way as to never directly cross the gaze of the Gorgon. Luhmann calls this strategy ‘eurlialistics.’²¹ It is not surprising that the prevalent culture of today recommends precisely this way of life as the solution to the enigma of the relation: it is that way of relating to others that consists in believing that one cannot and should not have any certainty in the face of problems.

Consequently, our ways of life are in conflict with an increasingly radical crisis, made of existential and solipsistic voids, because we are not able to confront and to respond to the enigmas of relations. From the sociological point of view, it is precisely here that lies the need to transcend the human.

We need a new relational cultural matrix

How is it possible to confront the enigmas of the social relations that people have to face in everyday life? The idea that I have in mind is that human transcendence can only be addressed by a relational cultural matrix having an ontological basis *in re*, which can avoid ambiguity and radical relativism (relationism).

In many other writings I have presented the idea that we have to overcome the cultural matrices of the past, both the classic (monistic) simple code $A = A$ and the modern dualistic (binary) code $A = \text{not}(\text{not}A)$, to resort to a third relational matrix $A = R(A, \text{not}A)$ (Table 4.1) (Donati, 2011b: 71). ‘A’ stands for an entity whose identity is defined through the relations with itself and its environment according to different cultural (theological) matrices.

The monistic code $A = A$ (the monistic principle of identity) has become too simplistic in the face of increasing complexity. The dualistic code $A = \text{not}(\text{not}A)$ is disruptive of society, because it works through continuous negations. If there is a code that can facilitate the building of a society able to include rather than exclude, promote social participation instead of isolation, this is

Table 4.1 Three cultural (theological) matrices defining the identity of an entity (A) through its relations with itself and the external world.

classical	modern	after-modern
monistic	dualistic	relational
$A = A$	$A = \text{not}(\text{not}A)$	$A = R(A, \text{not}A)$

More extensively (the identity of A in a networks of relations): $A = R[r_i(A, \text{not}A)]$
 [R=relation to the r_i relations that A has with its external world; it can be conceived in terms of relational reflexivity of A]

Source: Donati, P. (2011) *Relational Sociology. A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences* London and New York: Routledge, p. 71. Re-printed with permission.

precisely a relational code for which A – in the case of a human person – is a matter of proper reflexive relationality (R) between A and notA.

If, on the one hand, we observe that modernity continues its path of eroding human relations, then on the other hand we always see the reemergence of the need for new forms of sociability, in which we can live with trust, collaboration, and reciprocity between people. Some will say that these are fantasies or dreams of a utopia that are hopeless and meaningless. However, they are not quite so. In a perspective of critical and relational realism, this actually concerns needs that arise from the real world of people, or at least from those who do not allow themselves to be fascinated by the so-called post-human, trans-human, cyborg world, or specifically the world of technology – including the internet – which replaces concrete inter-human relations with digital and virtual relations in which the qualities of the human are lost. This is not to re-launch some abstract utopia, but to read the signs of the new historical dynamic that bring the concrete social relation back to the center of the era into which we are entering. I am thinking of a ‘concrete utopia.’

In order to transcend human deficiencies, coping with social relations becomes the solution rather than the problem. If it is true that social relations present enigmas to us and that enigmas contain paradoxes, some solvable and some unsolvable, then we must learn how to handle paradoxes. Unsolvable paradoxes can be confronted not only by accepting absolute relativism for which it is enough to continuously and endlessly change one’s point of view to manage to avoid the problems, but also in other ways, for example, adopting ‘counter-paradoxical’ strategies (I have provided an example in Donati, 1999: 29–83). When we are taken in a double bind, the counter-paradoxical response consists first of all in assuming an attitude of compassion toward the double bind that oppresses us, and then in separating the two binds that contradict each other, redefining them as relations to another term which gives them a different value and, therefore, completely modifies their initial relation.

For example, it is easy to ascertain that today’s culture imposes on us as a moral imperative: ‘you have to be free’; ‘you have to free yourself from all bonds’; and ‘you must not depend on anyone but yourself.’ This prescription constitutes a double bind because we arrive at a course of acting that catches us in a trap from which we cannot escape: in fact, if we behave freely (with total spontaneity), we are actually obeying the precept, and vice versa, if we fulfill the precept (we act out of duty), we are not free. The strategy is then, first of all, to smile at this injunction, and then to redefine freedom as a relational choice made by the one who depends, who chooses from whom/what he wants to depend, instead of denying any dependence. Human transcendence is precisely searched in, with, through relations that go beyond the semantic code of late modernity according to which the identity of the Ego is in denying everything that is different from Ego [A = not (not-A)].²² In fact, there is no individual human person who does not depend on other human beings and obviously on many relations with them. A pure dependence on one’s own ‘I’ is called narcissism, which leads to self-absorption. Consequently, the moral imperative becomes

redefined as authenticity of the choice of dependence that we make as a way to transcend ourselves. Our action is free insofar as it consists in choosing meaningful relations with the world, not avoiding their needs, because only *those* relationships and not others allow us to achieve what transcends us.

To explain this point, let us look at two ways of expressing ourselves that are formally the same but actually refer to two very different semantic codes. The first phrase is 'staying on Facebook means being free' and the second is 'staying on Facebook does not mean not being free.' Formally, they are two statements that are equivalent, because the double negative makes a positive. From the substantial point of view, however, it concerns two completely different symbolic worlds. If I say, 'staying on Facebook means being free,' I make an affirmation of the type, 'A (staying on Facebook) = (means) A (being free).' There is an unconditionally positive indication. If I say 'staying on Facebook does not mean not being free,' I make an affirmation of the type 'A (staying on Facebook) = does not (does not mean) not-A (not being free),' whereas the double negative implies the affirmation that staying on Facebook 'can' also mean being free, but not necessarily and still leaving the freedom of which we speak undetermined. In other words, staying on Facebook can mean 'something else,' something 'different.' The second equation leads to a world of various possibilities, among which is that of being free in a new sense, but only as one of many other possibilities (which, as Luhmann would say, is improbable).

The relational way then suggests another expression: 'staying on Facebook means *a certain relation to freedom*' [the identity of A is constituted by a relation between A and not-A]. In this case, the phrase invites us to examine which kind of relation (its qualities and causal potential) those who stay on Facebook have with freedom. It invites the subject to a relational reflexivity (Donati, 2011a) that the other two expressions do not involve, because they are simply assertive affirmations of presence or lack of absence of freedom. Moreover, it implies that a relational and positive sense is given to freedom, that is, freedom as 'relation to,' rather than as absence of bonds.

We are dealing with exploring a new horizon, that of a culture of inter-human relations that is able to create new forms of social life such as to put people in conditions of knowing and being able to creatively respond to the inevitable enigmas of living together not by having recourse to new technologies, but going beyond the range of the existing relational context and its human limits, i.e. transcending themselves through a new relationality.

The social ontology of the relation in and through which the human is transcended

Immanence and transcendence of the social relation

We need a new ontology of the relation if we are to find the road to take to give meaning to the enigmas that Western culture brings with it ever since its Greek origins. However, the road is marked by many obstacles.

The first obstacle is the temptation to say that everything exists only as relation, that there is no ‘substance,’ nothing that has a consistency in and of itself, and nothing that is not resolved in relation alone. This position is that of the *relationists* for whom social relations are nothing but transactions that occur in different social situations. They think of relations in a very pragmatic and relativistic way. They treat relations like a continuous and undetermined reference to infinity (an *eschaton*). A phrase of Richard Rorty clarifies it very well, when he affirms:

Everything that can serve as a term of relation can be dissolved into another set of relations, and so on forever. There are, so to speak, relations all the way down, all the way up, and all the way out in every direction; you never reach something which is not just one more nexus of relations.

(Rorty, 1999: 54)

Is that precisely how things are? I think not. Relationality does not cancel out substances, but forges them in social time, so that we must always read reality as consisting of substance and relation as *co-principles of what exists or that may exist* (the ‘being’).

For the relational approach, the terms of the relation cannot be dissolved in other sets of relations by reason of the reality of their relation, which is a structure with its own emergent properties and causal powers. This was illustrated in the clarification of who the ‘relational subject’ is and how it acts and is formed (Donati and Archer, 2015: 201-202).

Here I present a scheme of the main differences between the relational and the relationist approaches (Table 4.2).

It is an open question what social ontology we need in order to support a relational (not *relationist*) interpretation of reality, and why this ontology has or at least needs a transcendental matrix. We find here two opposite positions.

On one side there are those who argue that relationality is constituted and intelligible without any need for a realist ontology or a transcendental (theological) matrix. Along these lines is Niklas Luhmann, who does not speak of relation as an exchange and interdependence, but as an operational closing, and simultaneously as a cognitive opening of each system. What unites him with most relationalists is the use of a holistic formula of total immanence of social processes, according to which, relational emergence excludes both a social ontology and the reference to a transcendental reality (Donati, 2010; Teubner, 2009).

Luhmann affirms: ‘The (social) system is formed, *etsi non daretur Deus.*’ For him, the system – which is emergent relation, which is autopoietic²³ – takes shape *even if God were not granted.*²⁴ According to this theory, we must consider that, for example, the family – as a specific relational structure – does not have an ontological structure and is formed from itself as a network of communications without the need for an explanation that refers to some transcendental principle.

Table 4.2 The main differences between relational and relationist approaches

<i>Approaches</i>	<i>Relational sociology</i>	<i>Relationist sociology</i>
General ontology (why something is real)	An entity is real because it has specific causal powers in itself (due to its own structure)	An entity is real because it is thought of as such, its qualities are attributed by situated actors, and has the effects that follow from the fact of being believed as real (according to the Thomas theorem)
Presuppositions of social ontology (at the border with metaphysics)	Substances and relation are co-principles of social life: the human person is <i>formed by</i> social relations	Processualism (entities and relations are the products of mere processes): the human person is <i>made up</i> of social relations
Epistemology	Critical, analytical and relational realism	Radical constructivism
Agent/actor	Relational subject	Actant
Social relations(ships) and structures	Emergent effect of past actions and interactions	Relational expectations from past communications and transactions
The transcendental symbolic code that operates as cultural matrix of society	Relational logic (symbolic code) ontologically consistent	Repertoire of symbolic forms available and widely used in context
What distinguishes the human	Reflexive relationality	Meanings in communications
What is human transcendence	Making the human flourish according to the potential of its species-specific nature	Materialistic evolutionism that exalts the hybrid, the mixed, in order to transform human nature into a super-nature

A different view is that of those scholars for whom relation – as ontological entity (insofar as it is) – has its reason for being in transcendental reality. For instance, according to Thomas Aquinas, relationality is the ultimate reality (God Himself). Aquinas affirms: ‘*In Deo abstracta relatione nihil manet*’ (‘In God, if we make an abstraction of relation, nothing remains.’ *Sent. I, 26, 2*). Since creation is the work of God, creation is entirely relational. Moreover, it is so in a continuous manner over time, not limited to an initial origin. This means that nothing comes into existence if not through/for/with the relation that possesses in itself a principle of transcendence.

In these two seemingly opposed Luhmannian and Thomistic perspectives, there is the enigma of the relation that has come down to us through history. The riddle to be solved is this: is social relation in the world self-generated (as the orthodox Luhmannian say) or does it depend on a formula of transcendence (as Thomas Aquinas and Gunther Teubner say, although in different modes)? (Donati, 2010).

The answer is not simple. If we place ourselves before the comparison of these two positions, and we ask ourselves who is right, we could respond by saying that they are both right, but from totally different points of view.

The former (the ‘Luhmannians’) are right in the sense that it is true that relations form ‘naturally’ (due to inherent operations in the same contingent relations), and nonetheless, from a critical point of view, it is by no means assured that they are positive and humanizing relations, but rather the opposite is quite likely. For Luhmann, in fact, the relation is certainly an emergent phenomenon, but completely contingent and devoid of structured distinctions rooted in moral values inherent to relations themselves. That is why, for him, anything that is possible is also morally licit.

The others (those who refer to a transcendental matrix) are right in observing that an emergent dynamic rooted in transcendental concerns leads more easily to the creation of relational goods that a purely immanent way does not manage to create. This statement can be confirmed by empirical evidence, when, for instance, sociological surveys (Mahoney, 2010) point out that families who are inspired by religious values produce more relational goods than those more secularized (I mean those behaving, for instance, according to the ‘pure relationship’ described by Antony Giddens), although obviously any determinism is always excluded, since no family, even the most religiously inspired, is exempt from producing relational evils.

I propose adopting an approach that links the two perspectives as one sociological thesis to be verified. In short, the thesis to prove becomes that the social relation has its dynamic autonomy at the level of the ‘contingent’ causes in the sociological sense (‘be contingent’ here means to refer to the contingent empirical causes that unfold in space-time. That is, in each historically situated context), but does not have an absolute dynamic on the level of ‘ontological’ causes in the sociological sense (‘ontological’ here means that inhere in the ontological potentiality of an entity in coming to emergence as a reality *sui generis*). This is why a transcendental matrix is needed in order to recognize human rights beyond contingencies. Human rights, differently from civil, political and social rights, are recognized to the individual person in so far as they involve specific relations (for instance every child has the human right to be raised in a family instead of an institution), which means that specific social relations should have a transcendental sense to the individual.

What brings together the first and second causes is the ‘vital relation,’ which is both human and social because it relates the human and the social to each other. It ‘stands outside’ of terms that it gathers, *with its own qualities and causal powers*.

The *vital relation* is the relationship outside a human person that is necessary to herself in order to be reflexive in herself on herself, so that she can tell herself to be herself, on the basis of distinctions with what she is not. As it is said in the poem by May Sarton (1993): ‘Now I become myself. It’s taken time, many years and places; I have been dissolved and shaken, worn other people’s faces, run madly, as if time were there, terribly old, crying a warning,

“Hurry, you will be dead before.” This new relation to oneself is a new (or renewed) belonging to oneself, but beware: this belonging is not an end in itself, otherwise one falls into solipsism and narcissism. It is a belonging to oneself because, as a relationship, it implies the passage from a non-being (a possibility X, usually undetermined) to being someone in a reference system (*refero*) that keeps me bound to other than me (*religo*). Therefore, it is an emerging relationship (creative) that makes me exist unlike in the past on the basis of another reference system that I have chosen and to which I am bound, even if only temporarily.

The I cannot say to himself ‘I am myself’ except through an ‘other than self,’ which may be a physical entity or another person in the world, in all orders of reality (natural, practical, social and transcendental). It is in relating to the outside of her interior life that the person activates the inner self, which exists in itself. Personhood matures through social relations.²⁵ Personal identity is constituted in, and sustained through, our relations with others, such that were we to erase our relations with our significant others we would also erase the conditions of our self-intelligibility. The inner life has its autonomy, but this autonomy can only be activated and managed in relation to the outside, that is, to significant others and to the social context. For this reason, I call it ‘vital relationship.’ It is in this relation that the person can transcend herself, that is, tap into a reality that improves life, given that the person cannot transcend herself in a single act or in an external object (animal, plant, machine, or anything else) as such. She does this by activating a reflexive relation to what is other than herself. It is in this relation that the subject verifies the uniqueness of her identity as a human person (mind + body) who lives in an environment.

Obviously, the vital relation can generate goods or evils, but what is sure is that the absence or defect of the vital relationship produces evils and not goods. The very fact that, in a society, the social evils outweigh the good indicates that people fail to transcend themselves. Without this transcendence, people have an impaired, weak, distorted, fractured identity, and society navigates in the ocean of social evils, such as injustice, violence, existential emptiness, corruption and so on.

Let us look at an example. As we all know, the qualities and causal properties of water (H₂O) lie in the relational structure of the water molecule (and are not the sum of the properties and capabilities of hydrogen and oxygen). By analogy, the properties and causal powers belonging to a collective ‘relational subject’ (such as, for example, a couple, a family, an orchestra, a football team) lie in the relational structure that connects the agents. Obviously, unlike the physical world, in the social world the relational structure that connects the agents depends on their action (it is agency-dependent) and the situated context (it is context-dependent) and operates through relational feedbacks rather than mechanical feedbacks (positive or negative). It is the relationality of the structure that is called ‘*We-relation*.’ The We-relation is a kind of vital relationship. Certainly, as Porpora claims (this volume p. 45), also wolves and certain primates (not to speak of ants) act as “we”s, but their we-relation is ontologically different from the we-relation between humans.

This relationality is not only that of symbolic references, but includes structural bonds, and for this reason it is a concrete reality and not purely communicative. If the relationality between agents/actors consists of pure contingent communicative events, then it is equivalent to simple interactivity. In terms of the morphostatic/morphogenetic process, the elaborated structure will be a morphostatic structure reproducing the previous expectations and rules of the given context or will result in a central conflation between the agents and their relations. Functional systemic theory can describe how communications and their meanings are carried out and ‘construct’ the actors (Fuhse, 2009), but this description is completely insufficient to account for the factual reality of the processes and their outcomes. The deficiency is inherent to its cultural matrix, which presupposes that a merely communicated representation can be transformed into a reality that is, in fact, only virtual.²⁶

The solution to the enigma of the relation rests in the fact that the constitution of a relation *according to a certain structure* is necessary to ensure that each term (agent/actor) of the relation may obtain from it what it could not obtain in any other way. There are no functional equivalents for relations when they have a reality (relationality) *sui generis*. This is very clear for many traditional premodern cultures, like the Chinese culture of *Guanxi*, in which any deal or transaction must take place within an already established relationship and should lead to a renewed structured social relation.²⁷ But it is (or better, becomes) true also in trans-modern societies (Qi, 2013).

My argument is that, precisely because in highly modernized societies social relations become ‘always possible otherwise,’ only if they are selected and configured in a certain way can they generate those goods that are unrepeatable and not fungible for them.²⁸

The non-fungibility of social relations unfolds when people realize that to live in a world of relations that are thought as ‘always possible otherwise’ turns out to be a dream, devoid of reality, that generates frustrations, disillusion, addiction, estrangement, dissatisfaction, unhappiness and a lot of social and psychological pathologies. People know that certain social goods cannot be achieved through relationships that are interchangeable at will. Certainly, most people think that certain social relations do not make any difference. Take the case of the belief that all kinds of love relations with human beings or animals or robots are equivalent, on the basis of the idea that to make a difference between them is an intolerable discrimination. Most times, practical life undertakes to reveal to them the inconsistency of their belief. Then, and only then, they realize that one type of relationship is not fungible with a seemingly similar relationship. They start to think how to solve the enigma by looking for a unique (human) relationship that has no equivalent.

When can a social form be called human?

The most hidden reality of human life can mature as such only if it passes through appropriate social forms, that is, relationally valid to generate and express the

humus of human flourishing, that is, the relationality of the good life. A social formation can be called human to the extent that the nature of its internal as well as external relationality is qualified by the recognition and satisfaction of basic human needs and nourishes people's reflexivity in order to help them to realize their ethical ultimate concerns as a way of transcending human limitations.

In a relational language, 'a social form is human insofar as the social relationships of which it consists are produced by subjects who are oriented to each other according to a supra-functional sense.' (Donati, 2009: 133 my translation). This is precisely what is lacking in a relationship to a robot or an actant.

When I speak of the *nature* of the relation I mean its internal principle of operation. It is this operative principle that justifies the assertion according to which '*at the beginning [of each reality] there is the relation.*' (Donati, 2011b: 17).²⁹ This affirmation coincides with the ontological principle that is at the base of relational sociology. It is in this principle, on it, with or without it, which is played the fate of Western reason, and therefore of the 'Western society' itself, as regards a possible new humanism.

Relational sociology consists in the observation that society – or rather, whatever phenomenon or social formation (the family, a business or trading company, an association, the state), including global society – is neither an idea (or a representation or a mental reality) nor a material thing (biological, physical, technical, economical, or other types), but a complex (indeed a network) of social relations. It is neither a 'system,' more or less preordained or impinging upon individual agents, nor a product of individual actions aggregated or added together, but it is another order of reality: the society is relation, and every social formation – think also of the internet – is made of social relations. Every society or social form is distinguished by the *sui generis* mode of combining elements that make up what I call its constitutive 'social molecule,' whereas such elements interact according to certain relational dynamics making a new structure emerge, which can simply reproduce (morphostasis) or modify itself in a meaningful way in time (morphogenesis).

At the base of this interpretation of the social stands the *fact* (not the idea or the mere figuration or fiction) that the social relation must be conceived not as a reality that is accidental, secondary, or derived from other entities (individuals or systems), but rather as a reality of its own kind. Such a real entity (of a different kind from the *relata*) is endowed with an autonomy that consists in the peculiar way in which the affective, cognitive, and symbolic elements proper to human beings come to be combined. To state that society, indeed the whole of human reality, is relational can seem almost obvious, but it is not at all where the affirmation is understood as an ontological and epistemological presupposition, and therefore one is conscious of the enormous implications that derive from it.

In conclusion: the transcendence of the human lies in the social relation

In this chapter, I have tried to confront the old humanism of the West, taking into account the deep changes of our times that are trying to transform the

human into something else through technological progress. Basically, I see the possibilities of a neo-humanism in overcoming the old ‘personalistic views’ that have put what is human inside the individual as such rather than in its inner relational constitution.

The first-person perspective advocated by Lynne Rudder Baker (Baker, 2015) claims that humans and non-humans have in common ‘personhood’ and differ by their bodies. She assumes that the unity between the material and the ideational elements of any entity has no constitutive relational identity.³⁰ To me, this means assuming that *the nature of the relationship* between the human body and the human mind can be equated to the relationship between bronze material and a bronze statue. By this way we arrive at the result of considering smart robots as persons, precisely ‘electronic persons,’ *endowed with individual rights and duties*.³¹ This is where we arrive if we see electronic agents, as well as non-human animals, as new players in the political and legal arenas, as Gunther Teubner does (2006a). If a robot were regarded as a legal entity, it could be held liable for its actions. Robot ethicists often consider a robot a moral actor, but their arguments are deeply questionable.³² This is where we find the enigma of the social relationships that these ‘persons’ could activate.

Are the qualities and causal properties of the social relations acted by non-human ‘persons’ (as defined by Baker) equal to those proper to human persons? Certainly not. The relation between organism and reflexivity in a human being has a level and kind of contingency and context-dependency that cannot have any functional equivalent in a machine, whatever its ability to act as a person (‘I think I am I’) in respect to the matter it is made of.

Recognizing the dilemma inherent to the body-mind relationship existing in a human being as different from that of a machine means seeing the proper qualities and causal power of human persons in respect to any other entity. No artificial intelligence can manage the enigmas of human relations as human beings do, although the latter can respond to the enigmas in the most absurd, violent and deviant ways. I don’t think that machines might in principle be persons, because, although they can behave by reflecting in the first person, ontologically they lack the potential for expressing and managing proper relational feedbacks, relational generative mechanisms, and in particular ‘relational steering’ (Donati, 2013). Possibly machines can be more predictable and controlled, but replacing human beings with machines would mean condemning human persons incapable of managing their enigmas to become servants of machines (Morozov, 2013). It would create a society where few people command and the masses were intended to be treated as scrap.

Trying to resolve the enigma in a human way means being able to configure the qualities and properties of the relations in such a way that those involved can share something essential while their differences bloom. Obviously, this does not always occur even in human beings, because it requires an adequate personal and relational reflexivity. What is sure is the fact that it cannot ever happen for a machine.

If one tackles the issue of hybrid liability of intelligent systems, one has to recognize the existence of what Werner Rammert has called ‘distributed agency’ (Rammert, 2008). In distributed agency human action is distributed between many loci and instances that plan, control, and execute the activities. Agency is distributed between human beings. That is also the case in the hybrid liability constellation. Agency remains with natural persons. Robots work as mediators. Taken together, robot mediators have impact on the liability division between human beings.

Posthumans and transhumans are dreams populated by phantoms, and very peculiar phantoms that appear to be real, or better, seem to be real because they produce some realities. As Günther Anders (2016: section 24) claimed many years ago: ‘Phantoms are not only matrices of the experience of the world, but the world itself. The real as reproduction of its reproductions.’ The kind of evolution that they feed is not human. To avoid all the deceits that they bring with them, we need a neo-humanism that leaves behind the old humanism.

Humanism is no longer synonymous with ‘personalism,’ since what is human and what is personhood are more and more differentiated (according to the relationist idea, put forward by Baker, that there can be persons who are not human). Still today traditional personalism distinguished humans from other living beings for their ability to exercise an inner reflexivity and make individual choices of communicated ultimate concerns, on the assumption that the goodness of these features would spontaneously bring the common good. Neo-humanism must acknowledge that this simple concept of the person is no longer sufficient to identify the human person. The latter should be redefined from a relational perspective. In the new scenario, a person is human, and becomes more human (that is transcends herself), if and to the extent that she generates social relationships that support the flourishing of relational goods from which she feeds herself in order to be more humane.

Some may come to the misgiving that my perspective affirms two contrary things: that relation is already there and at the same time must come into being. How does one state that ‘in the beginning there is the relation’ if relation must be realized? Does this affirmation not have the Platonic flavor of supposing that there is an ideal subsistent reality that must only be actuated? This is not so. What I am arguing is the fact that persons come into existence and live in a context (which is always there) *from which* they are put into a structural relation within which they must act relationally. They are thus found necessarily in a morphostatic/morphogenetic process in which and through which people can reproduce preexisting relations or create new types of relations that confer on them previous identities or change them. These emergent identities may or may not meet (in various ways) the potentiality of the persons, and from here the greater or lesser happiness of the persons, according to the sense of greater or lesser human self-realization.

The transcendence of what is human cannot but happen with reference to this relational constitution. We have to look at the ontology of social

relationality, which has to maintain the autonomy of the human beings and at the same time bring out their relational good, in which they transcend themselves together with their differences. Trust, cooperation, caring for other people, and friendship are examples *par excellence*. Future highly intelligent and sophisticated machines will help human beings to transcend themselves, but transcending the human can only be a relational reflexive activity of human persons.

When we do not know what to do with others and with the situations of life, or what relation to have with the contingent world around us, then we feel confused, weak, fragile, sad, and in crisis. Every existential situation in which we find ourselves, each encounter with something or someone that puts us in trouble, is a relation that challenges us. Usually, we do not think of these situations in terms of relations, because we only see individuals and things. We must confront something (a situation) or someone (people around) and ask ourselves what to do. The fastest way to go is to find a technological device that can solve this problem. In reality, however, behind the challenge of situations, there is a challenge that we do not see, and it is the most important challenge. It is the challenge of the relation in play, which asks us to transcend ourselves.

We need to see the *Vital Relation* that, by linking the unity of body and mind to the context of existence, makes it possible for us to transcend ourselves. We must learn to deal with this *Vital Relation*. The enigma to be solved lies in this relation, not in technological devices. *Human life transcends itself when it sees the riddle of the relationship and finds the way out from it. The enigma of the relation contains the meaning of human life.*

My answer to the question of why, when and how the human can be transcended is therefore the following. The crisis of human relations is what fuels the search for a posthumanism that can remedy this crisis. The concomitant crisis of a collective faith and of interpersonal relations that we witness in contemporary advanced societies finds an explanation in the fact that in both of these relations the substance of relationality is diminished, that is, the qualities and causal properties of the reciprocity between the two terms of the relation are lacking. The loss of the inherent sense of the relation is the 'intervening factor' which explains both of the crises. If the sense of the human relation diminishes, then so does the transcendental relation, and vice versa. The same holds true for the relation between the human and infrahuman realms. For a deeper understanding of this point, it is necessary to recall that the source of the *meaning of the relation* lies in its transcendental matrix, although the social relation is generated (or is not generated) due to autonomous causes.

In summary, to grasp the why, where and how the human can transcend itself, it is necessary to 'see' the peculiarities of interpersonal relations and their enigmas. One could observe that even the relations with robots are enigmatic, but these enigmas are games, not the stakes of serious life (the Durkheimian '*vie serieuse*'). Thinking that the human person is distinguished

from animals, plants and machines because it is able to think in first-person (i.e. to think of oneself as oneself) is not enough. Nobody can exclude the possibility that, in the future, very smart robots or cyborgs could become able to behave in such a way. Calling them ‘persons’ as distinct from ‘human persons’ means to go back to the Greek concept of person as a mask – for example, in the modern version of puppets proposed by Goffman – or, in a more sophisticated way, it means to embrace the Luhmannian (neo-functional) view of the human person as a mere ‘reference point for communication,’ which removes the distinction between human and non-human.

To my mind, what distinguishes the human person is her ‘*structural relational constitution*,’ in the inner as well as exterior life. This dynamic constitution is the relational substance that enables the human person *to transcend herself in the relationship with others and with the world*, acting reflexively, not only in herself (personal reflexivity), but on social relations as such (relational reflexivity), which she assesses as good or evil, taking into account the behavior of significant others and reference to the situational context. The first-person perspective that has supported the traditional humanism for centuries should be included and upgraded within a new relational paradigm, otherwise the humanism that it seems to defend will be just the latest attempt to keep alive the old Western individualism vis-à-vis the arrival of ‘enhanced humans,’ androids, robots and cyborgs.

With respect to Archer’s (and Porpora’s) thesis that the necessary and sufficient condition for human personhood is our ability to engage in congenial relations based on reflexively elaborated concerns, I argue that human personhood is always embodied. Should we perhaps say that those who do not have this ability, or have it in a deficit, do not have human dignity? If human personhood designates the quality or condition of being an individual person, then the relationship that every human person can have with any other entity is necessarily dependent on the specific and concrete relational complex of mind and body of that person, as the characters of the *Ex Machina* movie clearly show. Humanity lies in the fact that our relationality to our body, just as our relationality to others, presupposes a transcendence that is lacking in machines and in (at least so far known) non-human forms of life.

In contrast to Porpora’s thesis according to which it is because of our relational personhood that we might, in principle, enter into *I-Thou* relationships with non-human entities, such as super-computer or extra-terrestrials, and recognise the worthiness of such non-human entities, I contend that this position runs the risk of psychologizing personhood, because the relationship of ego to a nonhuman entity turns out to be a projection of ego and not a ‘third’ emerging between two people. To exist and flourish, relational personhood requires that third.

The technologies that lead humanity towards the post/trans-human must be analyzed and evaluated based on the criteria of which human relations they assume, and of those they produce. We have to see if they support

arrangements that increase the ethical and empathetic sense of social relations or, vice versa, nurture relationships that are empty of human sense.

Notes

- 1 Here I use the term ‘transcendence’ to mean a relation that exceeds the limits of what exists through the production of an emergent effect. In the social realm, more than in the physical world, the emergent effect changes the qualities and the relational properties of the terms when related in a new relational structure.
- 2 I must point out that, with the development of the ICTs and the spread of increasingly sophisticated AI, the concept of person meets a process of relational differentiation. The concept of person differentiates into ‘human person,’ ‘legal person,’ ‘electronic person’ (robot), ‘person as a reference point for communication,’ and so on. To differentiate them, one must see the different qualities and causal properties of the relationality that each concept of person implies.
- 3 As Jones (2013: 418) reminds us, Western traditions (with exceptions such as Spinoza) view the world as an array of individual objects that are bound in a web of causal ties, whereas Eastern traditions view it as a unity in which the appearances of plurality and diversity are no more than ripples on the surface of an oceanic continuum. Applying this Eastern worldview (called ‘Buddha-nature’) to the human-machine interaction, depending on how you look at it, I could be regarded as managing the automobile, or it could be regarded as managing me. To control, in effect, is to be controlled. Thus, human beings and machines are fused together in an interlocking entity.
- 4 ‘The relation between you and your body (and the relation between the statue and the piece of marble) is what I’ve called “constitution,” a relation of unity that is not identity’ (Baker, 2007: 205).
- 5 ‘If parts of my human body were replaced by synthetic parts until the body that constitutes me was no longer a human animal, then, as long as my first-person perspective remained intact, I would continue to exist and I would continue to be a person. But if nothing had my first-person perspective, then there would be no me’ (Baker, 2002: 371).
- 6 She writes: ‘My account of the first-person perspective has some naturalistic and some non-naturalistic aspects. It is naturalistic in that it does not appeal to immaterial souls. The first-person perspective may well have evolved by means of natural selection; we human persons, with our first-person perspectives, are as much a part of the natural world as were dinosaurs. I have no doubt that there’s something going on in my brain that makes it possible for me to have I* thoughts [in Baker’s language; thoughts of myself on myself] and I have no doubt that our capacity to have I* thoughts is a product of natural selection’ (Baker, 2007: 206).
- 7 See, for instance, the critical realist approach to intellectual disability (Shakespeare, 2013) He claims that cultural disability studies fail to acknowledge the factual reality of intellectual disability. As a critical realist, he assumes that there is an object out there independent of the observer. Hence intellectual disability is a real thing that gets caught up in the social construction of ideas.
- 8 ‘On the Constitution View, something is a *person* in virtue of having a first-person perspective (or a narrowly defined capacity for one), and something is a *human person* in virtue of being a person constituted by a human animal (or body). Human persons are material beings, part of the natural order. As I develop the idea of constitution, this view of human persons has the consequence that although I am both a person and an animal, I am most fundamentally a person. Hence, my persistence conditions are the persistence conditions of a person (sameness of first-person perspective), not the persistence conditions of an animal (sameness of biological organism)’ (Baker, 2002: 370).

- 9 In the end, Bilimoria describes his perspective as a ‘frustrated attempt to complete fabricating a machine that creates Nothingness, or work it up at least as the transcendental concept of which no smaller can be conceived’ (Bilimoria, 2012: 529).
- 10 I use the term ‘transcendental matrix’ in the same sense that can be found in Weber’s analysis of the religious roots of world cultures (Weber, 1993) From the viewpoint of critical realism see Archer et al., 2004.
- 11 ‘[i]ntent, context and effect are better considered as intersecting concepts that cannot be compartmentalized into discrete categories. It is not about privileging intent, context or effect, but recognizing their interdependency. In order to move away from the notion of discrete variables that have their own unique influences, we call this inter-relationship the intent-context-effect matrix’ (McCormack et al., 2016: 760).
- 12 See for instance the concept of ‘the world as phantom and as matrix’ in Anders (2016); Teubner (2006b): ‘First, and everywhere visibly since Macchiavelli, the matrix of politics becomes autonomous. It becomes detached from the diffuse moral-religious economic ties of the old European society, and extends to infinity the usurpation potential of its special medium, power, without any immanent restraints. Its operative closure and its structural autonomy let it create new environments for itself, vis-à-vis which it develops expansive, indeed downright imperialist tendencies (...) Specific endangerment of physical and mental integrity by a communicative matrix comes not just from politics, but in principle from all social sectors that have expansive tendencies’ (2006b: 336–338). ‘Fundamental rights in the modern sense are not opposed to perils emanating from people, but to perils emanating from the matrix of social systems’ (2006b: 340).
- 13 One could easily see in this cultural position a mixture of Western and Chinese culture as depicted by Jullien, 2015.
- 14 The view of the human person as an emerging process has been illustrated by Smith, 2010.
- 15 According to Anders (2016: sections 22–26), the fact that not only our experiences, but even our needs, are molded, represents the maximum service of the matrix. This is because the matrices mold not just us, but the world itself. The artificial models of the ‘world’ not only mold us and our image of the world, but the real world itself. This molding process has a boomerang effect: that the lie really lies to itself. In short: *the real is transformed into the copy of its images*.
- 16 As Bernard Giesen (2005: 275) claims, on the basis of many arguments that contradict the radical separation of religion and politics in contemporary societies, ‘ordinary social reality is constituted by referring to something extraordinary that transcends the sheer positivism of rules, order, and structure.’
- 17 The post-human theories/praxis, like Braidotti’s, are inconsistent precisely because the ontological verticality (or ‘ontological stratification’) remains unresolved (van Ingen, 2016).
- 18 The theme of social ontology is broadly debated today in the informational sciences: cf. Floridi (2008).
- 19 Derrida (1967: 166) is pinned on the positive and negative ambiguity of the difference, which is a process of differentiation and also of deferment in time: ‘il faut peut-être que la philosophie assume cette équivocité, la pense et se pense en elle, qu’elle accueille la duplicité et la différence dans la spéculation, dans la pureté même du sens philosophique. Nul plus profondément que Hegel ne l’a, nous semble-t-il, tenté.’
- 20 (Lyotard, 1984). As is well-known, Lyotard argues that, in the postmodern condition, the meta-narratives no longer allow for the justification of the ‘pretense of truth,’ and he suggests that, following the collapse of the modern meta-narratives, mankind develop a new ‘language game’ (Wittgenstein), a game that does not

- claim absolute truth, but rather that glorifies *a world of perpetually changeable relations* both between people and between persons and the world.
- 21 (Cf. Luhmann, 1990a: 133–137). Luhmann retains that postmodern society can survive only by adopting this perspective – called *eurialistics* – according to which the insoluble problems of society (its paradoxes, like its enigmas) should be treated in such a way as to avoid directly confronting them, which means constantly changing one’s point of view by rendering everything ‘relative,’ that is, adopting a radical relativism, or rather radical relationalism.
 - 22 I am referring here to the binary code of Luhmann (2002), and not to Hegel.
 - 23 ‘Relation ... must be understood as an emergent system’ (Luhmann, 1990b: 210, my translation).
 - 24 *Ibid.*, 207, 210. The exact translation of ‘Etsi non daretur’ is not ‘*as if* God did not exist,’ but ‘*even if* God did not exist.’
 - 25 The importance of social relations to the constitution of personhood has been studied by many anthropologist, who have shown how personhood is tied to social relations – for example, among the Wari’ people of Rondônia, Brazil: see Conklin and Morgan, 1996; Bruce Knauff’s studies of the Gebusi people of Papua New Guinea depict a context in which individuals become persons incrementally, again through social relations (2012).
 - 26 An interesting criticism of this ‘matrix’ has been advanced by Anders (2016)
 - 27 According to Marcel Mauss and the French school of social exchange, this is true for all premodern societies.
 - 28 The arguments that justify this statement are found in Donati, 2015b
 - 29 The affirmation is of a sociological nature and does not depend on a seemingly similar affirmation of a biblical-theological nature (‘in the beginning is relation’) that is at the base of Martin Buber’s thought.
 - 30 Baker, 2011 argues that ‘The relation between the human organism and the human person is what I call “constitution.” Constitution is a perfectly general relation of unity-without-identity between things of two basically different kinds: A piece of bronze and a statue; a piece of plastic and a driver’s license; a human organism and a human person. An organism is essentially biological, but not essentially first-personal; a person is essentially first-personal, but not essentially biological.’ In my view, denying that there is a specific relation between the biological and the first-personal in a human being has crucial consequences, for it leads to deny the uniqueness of every human person. It is true that a statue of bronze is not identical with the bronze, but a statue of marble is not a statue of bronze. In the case of the human person, the biological constitution is different in all people, and this difference is relevant in respect to what a single person can consider, reason about, reflect on herself as herself.
 - 31 On May 31, 2016, a commission of the European Parliament voted in favour of a report that aims to grant more autonomous and sophisticated robots legal status of ‘electronic persons’ endowed with their own rights and obligations (recommendations to the Commission on Civil Law Rules on Robotics – 2015/2103(INL)).
 - 32 Amitai and Oren Etzioni have argued with valid reasons that AI and robots have no moral agency, and that the term ‘autonomous,’ commonly applied to these machines, is misleading, and leads to invalid conclusions about the ways these machines can be kept ethical: see Etzioni and Etzioni (2017)

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