

Ambiguities and aporias in the concept of nature within the bioethical debate

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Abstract

Bioethics is one of the domains where the concept of nature is most intensely discussed. This fact is somewhat paradoxical, especially if we take into account that, upon its creation, bioethics has sought to remove philosophical aspects from the issues it has raised. To illustrate the centrality of the concept of nature in bioethics, it suffices to analyse the way the discussion has changed in recent decades: a) initially, it was obvious that all human beings are rational beings and that this fact endowed them with an exclusive status conferring certain rights. Based on this evidence, bioethics attempted to determine these rights and the duties arising from these in the domain of Biomedicine; b) presently, however, the way in which we should deal with rational beings, their rights and our obligations, seems evident. The discussion will now consider the subjects bearing this status: is this an exclusive status for human beings? Does it extend to them all?

The text deals with the concept of nature which was adopted in the early bioethical literature; it explores the way it determined this change in the focus of the debate and identifies some of its most significant implications.

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1 INTRODUCTION

A quick analysis of the lively anthropological debate underlying bioethical reflection makes clear not only the role that the concept of nature has played within it but also that the debate itself has arisen and has been determined to a large extent by that notion.

Paradoxically, one of the reasons for this has lain in the fact that normally there has been no wish to take on the philosophical basis on which bioethical reflection has been founded, with there having been a preference to operationalize the debate without taking into account that philosophical dimension which threatened to perpetuate the debate. For the purposes of bioethical reflection — it has been argued — it is sufficient that we admit that there is certain immediate evidence of what it means to be a human being and that human beings are holders of rights. Everything else has tended to divide and hinder bioethical debate.

This initial consensus was based on the conviction that “human beings are not merely nature” and on the resulting conviction that this fact grants them a special status, by virtue of which they are subjects of rights that everyone should recognize.

The way of expressing this conviction has varied considerably in the few decades since Bioethics has sprung to life, but it has always been in some way linked to the ‘nature’/‘person’ opposition — or the ‘natural’/‘rational’ or ‘natural’/‘free’ oppositions which result from that — an opposition that seems to assume that a person, or rationality, do not belong to the natural world, are not natural. Initially, the thesis was that human beings, thanks to their rationality, were the only personal beings in the natural world, and an attempt was made to state the ethical imperatives which resulted from this condition. Later, the evidence appears to have been reversed and reflection assumes that the ethical imperatives associated with the personal condition are known, but it is no longer obvious to everyone what is to be a personal being or that this status is an exclusive prerogative of human beings. It is now a case of knowing what human beings are and understanding what it is that makes them singular or what differentiating factors allow them to be the subjects of rights. In this second stage, reflection is no longer ethical but mainly anthropological in the philosophical sense.

In both cases, the separation between ‘nature’ and ‘person’ or between ‘natural’ and ‘rational’ operates as a decisive element in such analyses. Initially, Bioethics adopted Kantian opposition between ‘nature’ and ‘person’ and based itself on this opposition: a person is what is beyond “merely nature”. Nature is material, manipulable, an object of dominion, space for the

exercise of power. The person is the opposite of this: is not material, is un-get-at-able and ownerless. More recently, the radical separation between 'nature' and 'person' has tended to be interpreted differently and has shifted into human reality itself, giving rise to the distinction between 'biological life' and 'biographical life'. Instead of contrasting the life of human beings and the life of the other living non-human beings, the 'natural'/'personal' opposition has been understood as a distinction which affects the individual human being. It is true that each individual member of the human species is usually subject to these two ways of life, but the fact that one can be present without the other seems to indicate that they are separable and are in fact separated. One thing is what a human being is by nature — a member of the *Homo sapiens* species — another, very different thing — it is argued — is that some of the individuals who exhibit human nature are persons or are rational individuals. Consequently, it is proposed that the notions of 'human being' and of 'personal being' should no longer be understood as coextensive notions: not only are not all human beings persons, but it is perfectly permissible that other animals are persons. The same argument would be valid for 'nature'/'reason' and 'nature'/'freedom' distinctions.

The conceptual change that has resulted from this new understanding is highly relevant. The idea of human identity has been thrown into question and this has led to a further investigation into the appropriateness of a characterization of human nature that has existed for over 24 centuries, namely the understanding of the human as a 'rational animal'. Indeed, to state that rationality or freedom refers to what in man is not 'mere nature', is also to hold that there are no 'rational beings by nature' or 'free beings by nature'; rationality and freedom have been de-naturalized and speaking of 'rational natures' or of 'free natures' would be like speaking of 'non-natural natures'.

In the following pages, I will present some aspects of the notion of nature which occurs in current bioethical debates. Moreover, I will identify certain non-thematized assumptions concerning the notion of nature which the bioethical debate has adopted and the way in which these are manifested in actual bioethical discourse.

2 WHAT ARE WE SPEAKING OF WHEN WE SPEAK OF NATURE?

The resistance to broaching the concept of nature is not exclusive to Bioethics; this involves a complex notion and questioning its meaning runs the risk of paralyzing any debate. It is true, as pointed out by Boyle almost 250 years ago, that it is very surprising that we talk constantly of nature,

that we pride ourselves on knowing its laws and mastering its mechanisms, that we aspire to be its “owners and masters”, and yet we have never once stopped to think what the term ‘nature’ actually means, or what we are referring to when we speak of it. Being so familiar, the term tends to be taken — in an illusory manner, according to Boyle — as something obvious which does not need any inquiry; from this false evidence, it follows that the ambiguities conveyed by the concept of nature, which have not been explained because they have not even been identified, are spread to the rest of the discourse and have thus weakened it¹. But it is also true that, when this does not happen, when the complex and ambiguous character of the notion of nature is recognized, the task of specifying its meaning seems to acquire superhuman contours, in such a way that it does not make sense to undertake it, but now for opposite reasons. This was the possibility that Voltaire alluded to in his famous dialogue between Nature and the Philosopher in the entry ‘nature’ in the *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie*. At a certain point in the dialogue, Nature censors the excessive inquisitive pretensions of the Philosopher and asks him:

“Since I am all that is, how can a being such as you, so small a part of myself, seize me? Be content, atoms my children, with seeing a few atoms that surround you, with drinking a few drops of my milk, with vegetating for a few moments on my breast, and with dying without having known your mother and your nurse.” And, faced with the insistence of the Philosopher, closes the dialogue by stating: “I will answer you as I have answered for so many centuries all those who have interrogated me about first principles: *I know nothing about them.*”²

Modern discourse seems therefore to oscillate between an illusory pretence of evidence, clarity and meaning, which would make any enquiry superfluous, and an impression of impotence which is accompanied by the conviction that it is not possible to go further. As we will see, the impact of both attitudes is felt in bioethical discourse.

Let us start by mentioning some aspects of the concept of nature to which we are heirs. Voltaire alluded to one of these points: nature is primarily understood as “the great all”³. Discourse about natures — a human, a stone, a dog — gives way to discourse about Nature, about the great ‘all’. Nature tends to be spoken of in the singular, with a capital letter, and substitutes almost completely any discourse on plural natures. Nature is the whole; singulars are natural only as atoms of that whole. But if what is natural is the whole, everything is natural; hence the notion, by being so comprehensive, it can be seen as irrelevant (there is nothing to characterize, because everything is natural) or, when it is not so, as excessive (to characterize nature

would be to grasp the whole).

Among the factors which have determined this significant displacement of the discourse on nature are those which some qualify as “emptying”⁴ this notion, an emptying required by scientific practice, which leads to eliminating everything that is not quantifiable, measurable, and reducible to a physical structure. The price to pay for humans to become “owners and masters of nature” is that nature loses profundity, is understood as pure externality, is spatialized, losing its interiority, and becomes transparent to science. It is thus understandable that the project for complete dominion of nature is supportive of the rejection of the notion of purpose for the natural world, a rejection which is carried out through the identification of *finality* and *design*, or of *finality* and *consciousness*. Teleological discourse is assimilated to anthropomorphic discourse and the structure — the spatial disposition of the parts — replaces a dynamic, teleologically determined form, which escapes technology and which is not tamed by it. Voltaire’s dialogue also illustrates this: there are only two things that we all know about nature, or that it knows about itself — nature is the whole and this whole is mathematical⁵.

From this conception of nature, which seeks to be transparent to science and totally externalizable, stems the difficulty in thinking of the dynamic dimension of natural beings, which has so profoundly marked modern philosophical debate. Interactions occur in nature, but it is not easy to find the discourse which expresses the specific and typical dynamism of natural beings in an adequate manner, because this dimension of natural beings tends to be subtracted from the scientific discourse or always refers to something beyond it⁶. Natural beings, conceived of as “substantially void” and as passive, are no longer seen as capable of being responsible for their own action, and their natures, when these are admitted, are not conceived of as stable principles for actions, or as a source and origin for their dynamism, and end up being conceived of as rigid, non-adaptable structures, from which identical effects always result⁷. When there are no signs of that rigidity and uniformity, the concept of nature is rejected. This is what occurs in the human case: the qualification of *natural* appears problematic when applied to most human behaviours because these behaviours do not appear to follow a fixed guide. What in other beings is nature, in us — it is said — is freedom or is custom⁸, neither of which is natural. Besides, in this way the modern concept of nature has led to the perception that we have of ourselves and to the understanding that our behaviour is or is not natural. The difficulty of thinking of a free nature or a rational nature — which, as we have seen, results from thinking of nature and reason (or nature and freedom) as anti-

thetical concepts — has led to the association of nature with a mathematical rigidity and inflexibility and does not allow us to see it as a stable principle for variable operations (in which case it could apply to humans and explain their behaviours), and not only as a fixed principle for identical operations; understood in this sense, the concept of nature is either rejected as inapplicable to humans or leads to identifying their nature with that which is fixed within them, namely biology and its laws.

In the beautiful invocation of the concept of nature referred to by Voltaire there is also another important point, which appears to be consensual, namely that of the increasingly blurred border between the natural and the artificial. Challenged by the Philosopher who asks Nature how it can be so crude in its mountains, in its deserts, etc., and yet appears so industrious in its living beings, Nature replies: “My poor child, you want me to tell you the truth? They gave me a name which does not suit me; they called me *nature*, and I am all art”⁹. And it explains to him that, if we consider the formation of the seemingly most insignificant beings — an insect, an ear of corn, a metal — we will see that all are equally wonders of art. When this secret of nature is understood, a secret that it only reveals when it is asked about, nature presents itself as a complex set of physical mechanisms which, once known, can be dominated and placed at the service of the very dominion of the material reality and its processes. From this perspective, the distance between the natural and the artificial, between the animal and the machine, disappears — in short, the distance between the given and its manipulation is annulled.

The modern conception of nature, briefly sketched out here, has faced one of its greatest challenges in its application to the human being. How to integrate the human being in the whole of nature as it is understood in Modernity? How to understand this being who, as an “atom of nature”, has pretensions greater than those of nature itself, as it aspires to seize it? In this way, in his imaginary dialogue Voltaire alluded to the singularity of the human being and, indirectly, to the ancient difficulty in thinking of his unity. What kind of unity has a being which is at the same time both biological and restless, or biological and conscious? A being which challenges the whole, the nature, and in some way ventures beyond inquiring about what nature itself is?

As has so often been accentuated, the assimilation of nature to pure externality was supportive of a dualistic anthropology, which renounced integrating the physical or biological dimension of the human being and its psychic and personal dimension into one unity. The problem was twofold: it involved considering, on the one hand, the *singularity* of human psychic life

and, on the other hand, thinking of its *connection* to the biological dimension of human life. Initially, the option was to accentuate the singularity, and to think of the human being as a *res cogitans*, associated with a body which neither defines or constitutes it, and which is separable from it. Later, to accentuate the incorporation of the human being into the natural world, the option was to start from the “human animal” and add to it a conscience, understood as something not contained within it. In both cases, the human being is presented as a dual, divided being, resulting from the composition of two different separable substances. The human being is seen as *homo duplex*, in the well-known expression of Durkheim: a structure made up of extracts of a materiality of a living being and a spirituality of a person. From this duality, it follows that objectivity and subjectivity seem to be totally unrelated dimensions, even if they are usually experienced as united. The distinction between “biological life” and “biographical life”, made familiar by the bioethical discourse, highlights this double dimension of human life in order to disconnect the two. The human being consists of an extensive material substance — the body, subject to biological life — and a non-extended and spiritual substance — the soul or, more commonly, the conscience, the centre of biographical life. Given their heterogeneity, the substances give rise to two worlds — two lives — and the unity between both become inconceivable.

Dualism and materialism are thus converted into the only possible perspectives of conceiving the human being, and over time this has resulted in a new materialistic type of prevailing monism, presented as a logical consequence of dualism and as a requirement for the adoption of a naturalist vision of nature. Nature is the totality of what there is, and what there is and what may be held up without question is material reality accessible to science. Those elements for which there is no physical explanation should not be considered, and that which is not explicable in scientific terms cannot be taken into account. In this way, the psychic dimension of human life — which had started to be considered as something completely separate from biological life and inaccessible to science — ends up frequently being seen as a somewhat irrelevant epiphenomenon of the “real” life of human beings. From the scientific point of view — that is, from the physical point of view — resorting to rigorous descriptions and analysis, what we have, and that which is indisputable, is biological life, within which there is psychic activity. Everything else will be interpretations, narratives, hermeneutics, private matters. It is true that we live as if our lives depended on decisions, expectations, projects, feelings, but what really moves us and determines us are chemical and physical processes, genes and hormones, over which

our will does not have any power. Biographical life is, therefore, a type of massive fraud, a “first person” substitute for a reality which can only be fully explained when it can be described in the “third person”¹⁰. The personal perspective – the fact that life is lived in the “first person” – to which we give so much value, to the point of seeing it as the foundation of all rights, is after all nothing but a “virtual” life, grateful but irrelevant. Although described in bold colours and without the necessary clarifications, the panorama pointed out here is not surprising; and it would be difficult to be able to expect anything else when the world of nature and the world of finality are systematically thought of as separate realities.

3 ECHOES OF THE CONCEPT OF NATURE IN THE BIOETHICAL DEBATE

Through the hand of Voltaire, some points on the concept of nature which we tend to consider as unquestionable were produced – it is the whole, a material whole, bottomless and purely mechanical, capable of being exteriorized, and mathematical. I have also taken into account how problematic this conception of nature is in order to capture the unity of the human being and his natural condition. Let us see how these various points have operated on and conditioned bioethical discourse.

3.1 *A “Purely Scientific” Approach*

Conditioning starts by being methodological. Determined to speed up the debate, some theorists in Bioethics have opted, as has been indicated, to exclude any philosophical consideration from reflection. Bioethics will – they argue – have to take into account only what we scientifically know about the human being. Everything else should be left out, however respectable it may be for some.

The intention was not to allow the debate to be contaminated by philosophical and non-consensual convictions. This intention, however, has not prevented contamination, nor has the debate stopped being philosophical because of this. Indeed, rather than totally excluding the philosophical dimension from bioethical reflection, what occurred was that some of these authors ended up invoking their own (philosophical) conceptions of the human being as if these involved scientific or empirical evidence, as if no philosophical presumption had been assumed. Therefore, some of these authors took as evident the thesis that it is only Biology or Embryology which is bound to respond to the question of the human being¹¹ and those who seek to get out of this “scientific” domain have moved into the field of ideology.

Indeed, while it has to be recognized that there are, in the overwhelming majority of cases, forms of human behaviour that go beyond the strictly biological level, the authors who argue in this way do not equate the need to review the very concept of the human they are using, and prefer to empirically record the aforementioned behaviours and attribute to the subjects which manifest them as a mysterious ability, of unknown origin, in order to explain them. Only the methodological discipline which keeps us within this rigorous and neutral factual record will, in their opinion, preserve us from the ideological reveries of the philosophers, in accepting that there is something in the human being that may escape empirical observation or experimental science. It is true that subjecting themselves to this rigid discipline results in essential questions remaining to be answered: where does this mysterious capacity come from and where do these behaviours arise from? How does one acquire this capacity? How does one lose it? And what is lost when this is lost? What relationship does this capacity have with the biological dimension of the human being? Can this capacity be observed in the overwhelming majority of human beings and not belong to all? This is the price to pay for the rigor of only accepting scientific statements — these authors answer resignedly.

However, a closer look enables us to easily understand that what is at stake in these positions is not a scientific matter; it is rather, perhaps to the regret of the authors who defend these positions, a philosophical matter. Considering the way that the concept of nature to which we have alluded determines this methodological approach, perhaps we have to recognize that the decision to reduce a human being to a biological dimension and the mysterious character of the consequent personal condition — the non-natural character of their rationality — is rather the price that some theorists in Bioethics are willing to pay to defend certain methodological and philosophical restrictions: specifically, those resulting from the empiricism which they themselves have adopted, but the theses of which they usually do not state or submit to examination, by considering them undeniable and irrefutable.

The assertiveness underlining the discourse on the personal condition of human beings in some bioethical literature can thus be understood. This assertiveness leads to invoking Biology to deny the personal condition of certain individuals or to providing factual experience to determine who enters within the restricted group of personal beings, as if, by so doing, we fall short of philosophy — in the domain of the experimental sciences — and not within philosophical discourse itself. In this context, the concepts of 'human nature' and 'natural' are scientifically interpreted through being presented

as purely empirical concepts, which are biologically based and statistical.

3.2 *The Distinction Between “Biological Life” and “Biographical Life”*

As has been mentioned, the distinction between “biological life” and “biographical life” is the way in which Bioethics has assumed the anthropological dualism which has characterized modernity. For those who argue this, the distinction is based on the idea that human life can assume two forms: one form common to all members of the human species and the other not experienced by all, and which nobody will consistently possess throughout their biological life. Human beings start by simply having “biological life” and over time usually start to give off signs that they possess and are developing a “biographical life” or a “personal life” as well. The two lives are neither intertwined nor linked. It is precisely because of this that it is possible for the first to be present and the second to be absent. It is also because of this, that belonging to the *Homo sapiens* species exclusively means having a “biological life”. Everything else — the “biographical life” that with time the vast majority of human beings show they possess — is something alien to their biological condition, not derived from it nor rooted in it, and, therefore, something that does not belong to their nature. As biological beings, the members of the species *Homo sapiens* are not distinguishable in an important way from any other living being, nor have anything which makes them unique, except a specific chromosomal endowment, which is enough to define the species, but which does not provide the foundation for, nor incorporate within it any important non-biological characteristic.

This thesis, more than explaining the difficulty in thinking in a convincing way of the biological and psychic unity of human beings, when the notion of nature is that which was previously alluded to, expresses the renunciation of thinking of that unity. Unity is illusory, and must be denounced as an ancient state of confusion which we are now in the position to correct¹². If the methodological restrictions previously mentioned are added to this renunciation, we are obliged to admit that the *logos* or rationality are qualities that: are shared differently by human beings; are possessed to a greater or lesser degree; may not necessarily be present in certain individuals of the human species; and will certainly not be there during certain stages of development in any of them. A human being — it is said — is a biological individual, which we are now in a position to define with full rigor, from their genetic endowment: from a strictly scientific point of view — it is insisted — being a human is only that. Now, similar genetic endowment tells us nothing about the capacity in which we usually find traces of the specifi-

cally personal behaviour of the human being. Rigor — so the argument goes — then obliges us to separate the “biological life” and the “personal life”, and attribute the former to all living human beings, not being able to affirm the second, except for some human individuals who specifically exhibit this kind of life. Hence the classic and ancient characterization of the human being as a “rational animal” is presented as a kind of categorical error, a confusion between the biological and the supra-biological, for which there is no empirical confirmation.

The pretension of rigour is explicit and the argumentation at first sight blameless: going beyond this — it is said — is going beyond the data, and when you have gone beyond data you have left science. But the problem is much more complex and the argument is far from obvious. From the various arguments that can be summoned to question it¹³, it is enough to remember the following: when the human being is defined through genetic endowment, the identifying criteria of individuals belonging to the human species and the actual identity of the individuals so identified are taken as synonyms and that identification is clearly reductive¹⁴. That it is possible to identify the individuals who belong to a certain species, in this case the human species, through a very precise and exclusive biological characteristic, does not permit the identification of the human being with that characteristic, that is, it does not allow for assimilating the identifying criteria to the definition; unless the human being has previously been reduced to a biological dimension, which would naturally be equivalent to accepting that rationality is something not constitutive but episodic, a property which is acquired and which is lost. Assuming this thesis and operating with it is certainly possible, but it is obviously a philosophical thesis, not a scientific thesis, because science — which we trust to inform us of the chromosomal endowment of the members of the human species — is not entitled to say what it means to be human. Nor was the question about human identity suspended until science informed us about our genetic constitution. As has been stated, this is a thesis which some would consider defensible, but it is necessary to recognize that it is also a problematic thesis: if being human is possessing a chromosomal endowment which does not individualize us, how can one then explain the presence of signs of rationality in such an incredibly vast number of animals of this kind? How can one explain that the vast majority of human individuals also end up manifesting a “biographical life”, that is, a life that does not stem from their nature? And it is the perspective itself on which this thesis is incorporated — a perspective where all pertinent questions demand scientific answers — which resists accepting that this addition is mysterious, arbitrary, and inexplicable.

What I am trying to indicate is that the non-explicit — and therefore not questioned — assumption of a certain conception of nature and of a certain criteria of reality, adopted in the name of rigour has not only rendered human behaviour incomprehensible — precisely that which is called personal, which is no longer bound to the (biological) being of the human — but has also obliged us to consider the origin of the so-called “biographic life” as mysterious and the unity of the human as problematic. In no other species can one observe such an important fracture: what is most characteristic of human beings, their chief behaviour, is, after all, something that is merely accidental, mysteriously added and not included in their nature.

The theoretical problems and aporias which have been discovered behind this attitude would be enough to make us reflect on the theoretical presuppositions on which this is based, and to lead us to return to them and discuss them. What is under discussion is a concept of nature which operates in our discourse in an almost tacit manner, and what is also under discussion is human identity and its original unity: humans certainly recognize themselves as a *complex* reality, but not necessarily as a *dual* reality. However, thinking of human complexity is thinking about the form of integrating the two dimensions of a single human life. Naturally, this integration will not be so if it is reductive, if it sacrifices either the biological or the personal, if it annuls either animality or rationality. The integration exists through complexity; that which was wanted to become manifest in the characterization of the human being as a ‘rational animal’. But to be able to talk without incoherence of ‘rational animals’ we have to return to incorporating teleology into biology itself, that is, into nature. This incorporation, indeed, neither annuls nor modifies the organically based physical explanations of psychic processes, because, if it is true that a purely mechanical explanation excludes teleology, the reverse is not true: teleology excludes neither mechanical explanation nor the presence and role of materiality; on the contrary, it necessarily implies them.

3.3 *Owners and Masters of Nature*

Another dimension of the notion of nature with significant echoes in bioethical reflection is based on the gradual annulment of the difference between ‘nature’ and ‘artefact’. A brief note will suffice to stress the importance of a theme which is not easily summarized in a few lines and to which Bioethics is increasingly looking at with greater attention. We have witnessed the attempt to “naturalize” the machine and the growing “artificialization” of nature. This process, which the alliance between technics and science has

in some way made inevitable, affects our conception of nature and also our relationship with it; more radically, above all it affects our relation with our own nature. Nature — our own or that of others — is no longer considered as given and begins to merge with the manipulation to which it is subject. It follows that we fail to find in nature an operative and formal dimension which is instantly recognizable: we fail to find reason to distinguish between natural and non-natural behaviour or ways of being, and nature is no longer considered as a guide for behaviour. As rightly pointed out by Robert Spaemann, the impulse which destroys the previously given natural structures, which transforms them and reduces nature to its elementary molecular structures, is as natural as what is destroyed by that impulse. Hence complete technicism is also a complete naturalism¹⁵. C.S. Lewis pointed to this possibility when he warned that the expansion of dominion over nature is always an expansion of dominion over human beings¹⁶.

The issue is particularly relevant in the field of Biomedicine, where technical interventions are more radical, because they manipulate the identity of the individual upon which they are practised: how then can one think of the relationship between human beings and what is immediately given, between the human being and the nature upon which he acts as an artist? Paths pursued in bioethical reflection have essentially been the same as those which anthropology has traversed in other areas: nature is either identified as an initial state, the state of nature, prior to history and development, or it is conceived as the set of faculties and the set of needs of the individual, which become patent when detached from traditional constraints. In the former case, nature is the starting point for freedom and freedom is seen above all as liberation from nature. Technics is therefore seen as the path towards freedom. Some trans-humanist circles have opted for this possibility¹⁷. In the latter, the process is inverse: it is nature which provides the emancipatory function, with it being necessary for it to free itself from the cultural barriers which “naturally” oppress it. This emancipatory process gives voice to the spontaneous and has no teleological dimension. The very impulse will determine its endpoint. In both cases, it remains paradoxical that, as Voltaire pointed out, remaining in nature is experienced as being contrary to nature, and we see ourselves somehow forced to think of the human being as a being destined by nature to overcome nature.

In both cases, one question remains unanswered: how is it possible to think about the scope and limits of technical intervention of humans on nature, their own and that of others? For there is the risk that, when departure from nature is carried out through the progressive submission of nature, and this becomes an end in itself, the permanence of the human species is not

guaranteed and what occurs is not the overcoming of nature, but rather the elimination of the human being.

NOTE

1. Cf. M. Hunter, E. Davis (Eds.), *The Works of Robert Boyle*. Pickering and Chatto, London, 2000, vol. 10, p. 439.
2. In Voltaire, *Les Oeuvres Philosophiques de Voltaire*, Voltaire Fondation, Oxford, 2012, vol. 42B, pp. 289-290: "Puisque je suis tout ce qui est, comment un être tel que toi, une si petite partie de moi-même pourrait-elle me saisir? contentez-vous atomes, mes enfants, de voir quelques atomes qui vous environnent, de boire quelques gouttes de mon lait, de végéter quelques moments sur mon sein, et de mourir sans avoir connu votre mère et votre nourrice (...) Je te répondrai ce que je réponds depuis tant de siècles à tous ceux qui m'interrogent sur les premiers principes; *je n'en sais rien*".
3. Cf. Voltaire, *op. cit.*, p. 287: "Je suis le grand tout. Je n'en sais pas davantage"
4. Cf. R. Spaemann, *Das Natürliche und das Vernünftige. Aufsätze zur Anthropologie*, Pieper, München, 1987.
5. Cf. Voltaire, *op. cit.*, p. 287: "Je ne suis pas mathématicienne; et tout est arrangé chez moi selon les lois mathématiques".
6. Cf. Leibniz, *Système nouveau de la nature et de la communication des substances aussi bien que de l'union qu'il y a entre l'ame et le corps*, in Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*. Herausgegeben von C.I. Gerhardt, Berlin, 1880, vol. 4, pp. 477-487.
7. Or come to be understood, as was precisely the case in Leibniz, in terms of pure spontaneity.
8. Cf. Pascal, *Pensées*, sect.. II, 93, in *Oeuvres de Blaise Pascal*, Librairie Hachette et Cie, Paris, 1904, vol. XIII, p. 21: "J'ai grand peur que cette nature ne soit elle-même qu'une première coutume, comme la coutume est une seconde nature".
9. Voltaire, *op. cit.*, p. 288: "Mon pauvre enfant, veux-tu que je te dise la vérité? c'est qu'on m'a donné un nom qui ne me convient pas, on m'appelle *nature*, et je suis tout art".
10. Cf., for example, D. Dennett, *Sweet Dreams. Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachussets, 2005, pp. 25-56; *Consciousness Explained*, Penguin Books, London, 1991, pp. 70-72. D. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 16. Cf. also J. Arana, *La conciencia inexplicada. Ensayo sobre los límites de la comprensión naturalista de la mente*, Editorial Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 2015, *passim*.
11. Cf. F. Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 2002, p. 13: "Modern biology is finally giving some meaningful empirical content to the concept of human nature, just as the biotech revolution threatens to take the punch bowl away"; P. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd ed., Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011, p. 73: "It is possible to give 'human being' a precise meaning. We can use it

- as equivalent to ‘member of the species *Homo sapiens*’. Whether a being is a member of a given species is something that can be determined scientifically by an examination of the nature of the chromosomes in the cells of living organisms”; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 74-75: “I propose to use ‘person’, in the sense of a rational and self-aware being, to capture those elements of the popular sense of ‘human being’ that are not covered by ‘member of the species *Homo sapiens*’”
12. Cf. P. Singer, *op. cit.*, cap. 4.
 13. Cf. M. Mendonça, *Haverá seres humanos que não são homens? A propósito da teoria da personalidade de Singer e Hörster*, «Revista Portuguesa de Bioética», 2007/3, pp. 171-186.
 14. As it would be reductive for example, to say that being Portuguese is having a Portuguese passport. Having a Portuguese passport is something exclusive to Portuguese citizens, so that possession of this can identify a Portuguese citizen, but being Portuguese is clearly something else.
 15. Cf. R. Spaemann, *Naturtheologie und Handlung*, in *Philosophische Essays*. Erweiterte Ausgabe. Reclam, Stuttgart, 1994, pp. 51-59.
 16. Cf. C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Oxford University Press, London, 1943, *passim*.
 17. Cf., por exemplo, N. Bostrom, *Human Genetic Enhancement: A Transhumanist Perspective*, Preprint of paper published in the «Journal of Value Inquiry», 2003, vol. 37, pp. 493-506, p. 5: “Transhumanism does not require us to say that we should favour post-human beings over human beings, but that the right way of favouring human beings is by enabling us to realize our ideals better and that some of our ideals may well be located outside the space of modes of being that are accessible to us with our current biological constitution”.

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