REVIEW

*FRAGILE UMANITÀ BY LEONARDO CAFFO*

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Author of numerous books, Leonardo Caffo, is an Italian essayist and philosopher based out of the Polytechnic of Turin where he currently teaches ontology in the Faculty of Architecture. His primary research is in animal studies, and as such, it is no wonder that Caffo latest literary venture is into that of posthumanism.

*Fragile Umanità* (literally ‘Fragile Humanity’), like Caffo’s other works, is written entirely in Italian with currently no English translations available. However, given its content, conciseness and philosophical rigor, this is a worthwhile project for academic translators to tackle.

The book, as is stated in the opening lines of the introduction, was written in the Department of Anatomy of one of the institutions to which Caffo belongs. An initially strange place for a philosopher to find themselves seeking inspiration, but arguably the perfect location – as Caffo argues – to develop the concept of the ‘posthuman.' The primary aim of this text, and the reason for which Caffo surrounds himself with human anatomy is to bear witness to the limits of anthropocentrism, to see the boundaries between appearance and being and to overturn the basic dichotomous assumptions that he contends are ‘fragile’ in the various humanisms from which anthropocentrism arises.

As is typical with book-length works on posthumanism, an account of humanist archetypes is discussed. Caffo discusses the classical examples of anthropocentrism that are culturally and socially ingrained, such as the theological underpinnings for geocentrism as well as the more contemporary exploitation of natural resources and non-human animals. He sharply castigates this exploitation with an imperative to move ‘beyond’ the anthropocentric singularity of humanity and instead aim to see the interconnectedness of all things that fundamentally show the failure of our anthropocentric history. The ‘posthuman’ concept, he argues, can serve as a new modus operandi for our way of living. As such, he contends that we should learn to experience life through the plurality of phenomenologies that differ from our own.

His previous work on the relationships between humans and animals primarily emphasizes the need to achieve a state in which the sentience and due respect for non-human animals are affirmed, rather than continue with the failing self-serving anthropocentric conceit of animals as objects for “slaughter” and consumption (see Caffo 2013,2015). *Fragile Umanità* builds on his previous theses but goes a step further. Rather than a strict focus on the human-nonhuman relationship, Caffo focuses specifically on humanity and, abandoning any prejudices for the biases explicated in his previous works, lays a roadmap on how to overcome the tendency to reduce the world, and the existing diverse phenomenologies and enmeshments of all things to merely perceptions.

As such, Caffo argues that the philosophical concept of the ‘posthuman’ - which he adopts from other works of posthumanism and critical theory such as Ferrando (2013), Harman (2014), Haraway (2016), Meillassoux (2009) – is not exclusive to philosophy nor is it exhausted by it, but extends into other domains, particularly art and architecture. This contention is not original, however, as many posthumanist scholars as well as those engaging in other interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary works that overlap these fields are wont to suggest. Nonetheless, this concept, is a novel life-mode, one that, even if it is not adopted at the large scale by institutions, societies or governments, must nonetheless be adopted by the individual citizen.

Technically speaking, the book is divided into two parts, each of which is divided into the books total five chapters. These chapters are subdivided into smaller, bit-size sections. Sitting at 120 pages, the organization of the book makes it read more like a manifesto than a traditional academic exposition. However, this does not detract from the book's scholarly pursuit, in fact, not only is its readability heightened, but the ease of which the reader can follow and assess the author's arguments are similarly benefited.

Part one of the text regards what Caffo calls ‘transformation’, and it is characterized by three tenets or ‘axes’: (1) the ethical dimension which discuss the conception of species and Caffo’s own concept of antispeciesism; (2) the metaphysical dimension that centers on the integration of the Ptolemaic conception of the cosmos and that of the Copernican revolution; (3) the scientific transformation discusses the transition from creationist conceptions of earth and humanity to that of Darwinism.

Part two, titled ‘Speciation,' provides a contemporary definition of what contends as posthumanism and it is here where Caffo's argument makes the most impact. Whereas part one provides a historical understanding of humanism and its inherent failings, part two seeks to remedy the humanist conceit with that of a posthumanist vision.

Its strength lies not only in its explicit argumentative and organized style but its arrant and original study of ethics and metaphysics within the domain of posthumanist studies. Caffo devotes his concluding chapter to the operationalization of his philosophy, something that most theorists lack in their tomes,a way to put into action a novel consciousness that is aware of anthropic correlationism, yet still empathetic to the situating of the human-object as an agent of non-human phenomenologies. As such, theory is met with practice as Caffo attempt to draw the sketches of a novel posthumanist ethics and politics, one that is certainly worth evaluating further.

Unlike other topical texts, which may become bogged down in qualifying materials, or weighed by the poetic language of metaphor, that, if over used, may provide less clarity than its aim, Caffo competently situates his assertions in clear and direct prose. His posthumanist endeavor, stylistically, is far removed, although heavily influenced by the works of other Anglophone posthumanist scholars like Karan Barad, Timothy Morton, and Donna Haraway, and instead resembles the more lucid specialists such as Stefan L. Sorgner, Francesca Ferrando, and Trijsje Franssen among others. A work of this length merits this style and performs it well. Similarly, Caffo is unwilling to employ his field-specific jargon without a sense of wry and self-awareness that pulls the reader on to the level of the text, rather than lecture to the reader. Once often encounters Caffo referring to terms like ‘anthropocentrism’ as being the ‘magic,' central terms of the text and the subject of study. More often than naught, Caffo’s sentences read like this:

Every time we meet the gaze of a creature that differs from us, or we stop to admire the immensity of a tree or the light of a star, we are on the correct path. The problem, so to speak, is the filter through which we observe reality: as if we had glasses that render our space concave, when it is actually convex. (Caffo 2017, IX, *my translation*).

Similarly, rather than provide an exhaustive genealogical account of correlationism, as other authors are wont to do, Caffo defines it briefly, devoting no more than two lines of text to it and yet provides a sufficient explanation that isn’t burdened with the classical accounts of Kantian ontology. A surprise to be sure, but a welcome one.

Unfortunately, there are some notable areas of contention in *Fragile Umanità*, the most notable being the lack of references to many foundational texts in posthumanism. Although authors like Graham Harman, Francesca Ferrando, and T. Adorno are mentioned, a curious lack of work on which Caffo’s work is apparently built is missing. For example, Caffo’s concise explanation of correlationism as discussed above is laudable to be sure, but its brevity should be accompanied with a reference for further reading, mainly because of its importance in the field of posthumanism and critical theory. To be fair, the book is an obvious attempt at providing a pocket-sized introduction of posthumanism to an Italian audience, and as such, it does not try to nor claim to be exhaustive in its endeavor. However, a list of further reading to the foundational material is nonetheless left wanting.

To sum,although *Fragile Umanità* is a concise text, it is an extremely rich essay that is well-researched, argued with the highest standards of academic rigor and yet remains easily accessible to both scholars and non-professionals alike. Its ability to provide a historical argument for the failure of humanism, dissemination of the meaning of posthumanism and a thoroughly argued section on how to apply such a philosophy is executed with such ease by Caffo; it is an audacious scholarly feat. His book not only provides an unquestionable introduction to posthumanism and arguments for its adoption over humanist philosophies but also as a useful resource for those in other domains such as animal studies, ontology, and governance. Although the book has a limited audience given a lack of translation, it nonetheless marks a critical point in Italian philosophy in general as a node from which we should expect further novel research on posthumanism.

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