

# PRACTICAL RATIONALITY & HUMAN DIFFERENCE

Perspectives *on* and *beyond*  
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## NOTES ON THE HUMAN DIFFERENCE

This paper should be conceived as a very general discussion on the topic of the human difference. What I am about to advance is not a standard theoretical proposal, since I draw from a (neo)classical background in a cultural context where the empiricist heritage appears to be more influent and widespread.

The fundamental theses of my paper are two. The first one is that what differentiates human beings from animals resides in the relation of the entire person to what I call transcendental infinity. The second one is that every reduction of the human being ultimately results in a contradiction.

In order to support these theses, I will first clarify the different meanings of the words ‘infinite’ and ‘infinity’, which I use here as synonyms. Secondly, I will attempt to explain how the reference to transcendental infinity gives an account of the specific mental, affective, and bodily life of the human being. Finally, I aim to point out the fundamental reason for the irreducibility of the human difference.

### 1. *Identifying Different Kinds of Infinity*

Philosophical literature typically accepts (albeit critically) three different kinds of infinity.

1.1. The first kind is the *infinity of perfection*, namely God, understood as ontological perfection: that of which nothing greater can be conceived. Such an infinite is given—by hypothesis—*totum simul* as a metaphysical reality. In this sense, it is ‘determined and not incrementable’.<sup>1</sup>

1.2. The second kind is *potential infinity* (*ápeiron*), a sequence of natural numbers being the simplest example of it. Such an infinity is not given *totum simul*, but it is given either in finite form (as an incomplete

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1 By ‘not incrementable’ we mean that which is not capable of any addition.

sequence) or in the form, also finite, of an algorithm that generates a sequence. On closer inspection, potential infinity is the tension of the finite towards the infinite.<sup>2</sup> Potential infinity, therefore, remains perpetually incomplete, and for this reason is ‘indeterminate and incrementable’.

1.3. The third type is the *transfinite*, which concerns all possible numerical sequences when they are considered, hypothetically, as just as many sets of elements present *toti simul*. Each of these sets consists of an infinite number of elements, while at the same time they are constituted in the form of a hierarchy arranged in accordance with different numerical powers. For example, the set of elements of the ‘real’ numbers is more numerous than the infinite set of the ‘rational’ numbers. This type of infinite can be said to be ‘determined and incrementable’.

1.4. Based on our understanding, the most radical kind of infinite is the *transcendental* one. This kind of infinity can be said to be more radical for three reasons. First, because it is what enables us to construct the progressive and incomplete sequences typical of potential infinity. Secondly, because it lies at the base of our capacity to simultaneously and fully comprehend countless elements in a set, as it is evident in the case of the transfinite. Thirdly and most importantly, because the transcendental infinite allows us to conceive the infinite of perfection. This fourth and more radical kind of infinite does not refer to any specific content, and therefore is ‘indeterminate’. Nevertheless, it is also ‘not incrementable’: in fact it is all encompassing by its nature and can only be determined from within. Its actuality, however, is only formal: meaning that its existence is not subsistent in itself.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the formal actuality of the transcendental infinite is the horizon that bestows on human beings their specific *status*.

1.5. It is a *status* of a particular biological entity, rooted in physical conditions, and as such susceptible to generation and corruption. The peculiar *status* of this biological entity, however, is the infinite horizon that characterises it. The finite positivity of this entity is oriented—in its intellect, its desire, and its drives—towards an infinite horizon. Indeed, the human being only makes sense in relation to such a horizon: in other words, she is itself a symbol of the infinite.

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2 For instance, the body, which occupies space, can theoretically be increased or decreased indefinitely. The same is also true of time and number, the former in so far as it participates in duration and the latter to the extent that it shares in the scope of possibility.

3 Here I use the terms in their classical sense, and not in the sense used by Meinong.

## 2. *Rationality and Symbolic Language*

The constitutive relation to the transcendental infinite is precisely what allows the human beings to abstract from universal concepts, and to articulate them in the form of judgments. It is thanks to this infinite horizon that they are able to transcendently recognise valid principles and to logically connect judgments thanks to those principles. In short, it is the transcendental infinite that gives rise to an authentically human rationality, and what distinguishes it from the abilities that belong to animals.

2.1. I have just argued that the universal concept is a structure that needs transcendental in order to be formed: in fact, when the human mind abstracts from a meaning and relates it to the potentially infinite horizon of individuals which can instantiate it, it gives rise to a universal concept. And the horizon embracing the potentially infinite is the transcendental one. Furthermore, the associations made between concepts are intelligible when they are consistent with the principles of transcendental—typically, that of non-contradiction.

2.2. The transcendental infinite not only plays a role in forming universal concepts, but also it is what differentiates human language from the communication of animals. This difference lies above all in people's ability to communicate symbolically. To communicate symbolically entails the ability to express universal concepts through phonetic, graphic, or imitative signs. It is well known that, in some animal species, communication can be very refined and open to learning—for example, the signature whistle of the bottlenose dolphin—but this does not seem to be symbolic in a 'universal' sense.

It is also known that some anthropomorphic apes can be trained to imitate symbolic language, reproducing some deictic holophrases (for example, 'give me water')<sup>4</sup> through a 'code of signs'. These holophrases, however, are devoid of syntax and their learning can be explained as mere associative memory.

Indeed, syntax involves the phenomenon of 'expansion', thanks to which one can normally insert an element between two other elements, and then repeat the process on the results that the operation itself produces.<sup>5</sup>

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4 'Holo-phrase' is a sign which collectively indicates content that, in a syntactically organised language, would be articulated into subject, predicate, and complements. For example, 'give me water'. 'Deictic' is an expression which indicates a content that is in the perceptual field of the subject (e.g., water is there).

5 Expansion is also a morphological phenomenon. The morphology of human language can achieve some form of expansion, by inserting morphemes within

‘Encasement’ and ‘recursion’ are two instances of this phenomenon. Encasement allows one to use a phrase as a component of another phrase.<sup>6</sup> Recursive<sup>7</sup> competence, on the other hand, is the ability not only to follow a rule, but also to apply the same rule indefinitely to the results of its previous applications.<sup>8</sup> For example: ‘Mario is going to see Franco today’; ‘Mario, who came to my house yesterday, is going to see Franco today’; ‘Mario, who came to my house yesterday, goes to see Franco today, who normally does not invite anyone’; and so on.

More generally, syntax entails both the practice of rules and the ability to abstract and universalise them—that is, the ability to abstract the practiced regularity, so that it can be applied freely.<sup>9</sup> This is precisely what characterises human language, in its ordinary as well as its mathematical and logical form. And this is a relevant mark of the infinite character of such a language. Recursion does not seem to belong to any animal codes, including the most refined ones.<sup>10</sup>

2.3. We must not be surprised by counterexamples that have been offered against the aforementioned universal character of syntactic recursion. Beyond the differences that persist between schools of thought, there is nevertheless a general recursivity that even the opponents of ‘generativism’ recognise. Even for them, human language is capable of conceptualising a ‘discrete infinite’; in other words, it is able to produce a potentially infinite set of expressions, using finite means. As it stands, this phenomenon of the discrete infinite goes beyond the question of a specific recursion that Chomsky previously highlighted.

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already formed words (thus, for example, we go from ‘festa’ to ‘fest-icciol-a’, from ‘piccolo’ to ‘piccol-in-o’). Now, something analogous happens in certain forms of animal expression: for example, the warbling of a nightingale can involve self-insertions of phonetic units, realising a certain range of variations. However, this does not provide for real recursiveness.

6 For example: ‘I saw the man, whom you invited to dinner’; ‘that you enjoyed dinner, we are very pleased’; ‘I didn’t like the book Luigi lent me’.

7 Linguistics takes this term from the logic of mathematics—particularly from Gödel (in his 1931 theorems). But in fact, recursiveness ( $n \rightarrow n + 1$ ) is already one of the generative axioms of natural numbers.

8 For instance, the ‘rule of a relative proposition’: for which a relative proposition can always be applied to a name.

9 According to Chomsky, the child does not mime, but abstracts and applies rules – at the cost of making the rule prevail over irregular but habitual use. Cf. Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1965).

10 An example of such a refined language is the ‘dance of the bees’.

Unsurprisingly, Howard Lasnik argues, in light of over sixty years of debate on the subject, that infinity is one of the fundamental properties of human language, perhaps the most fundamental.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. *Desire, Passion, and Freedom*

In order for us to grasp the way in which the transcendental horizon is constitutive of the whole person, we must consider its impact on his emotive and volitional life.

3.1. For a human being, the predisposition to engage with reality is defined by its relation to that transcendental horizon. In its essence this predisposition is not defined as a tendency towards this or that particular object, but towards an object that is both infinite and ideal. This object can be called ‘transcendental’, and the active orientation of human desire to this object is classically understood as ‘freedom’.

3.1.1. Desire possesses a transcendental object, that is, the ‘good as such’. Therefore, Thomas Aquinas asserts that the human being is able to consider their particular choices in light of the transcendental horizon, and thus to relativise them.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, Duns Scotus highlights that a human person’s desire can also put the possible objects of choice at the forefront, and consider them as if they were absolute, while bracketing the transcendental horizon.<sup>13</sup> In both cases, nonetheless, the crucial factor is the dialectic between the particular objects and the transcendental horizon. In the first case, the horizon is placed at the front in order to be able to bracket its particular contents. In the second case, it is the horizon that is bracketed in order to be able to focus on the particular contents.

3.1.2. Following a different paradigm, which has established itself in modernity, freedom is disclosed to every rational subject through the person’s engagement with practical and theoretical laws.

In the practical realm, as Kant famously noted in *Critique of Practical Reason*, the imperative form of the moral law makes sense only if addressed to a free subject; therefore, whoever is aware of the appeal of the moral law can also be aware of his own freedom.

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11 Cf. Howard Lasnik, *Syntactic Structures Revisited: Contemporary Lectures on Classic Transformational Theory* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), p. 3.

12 On this subject, see *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, qq. 9–10, Leonine edition.

13 This capacity of *adpetitus eliciens* is described in *Ordinatio Scotti*, IV, dist. 49, q. 5, ed. by the Commissio Scotistica.

In the theoretical realm, which is that of the first logical-ontological principles, freedom plays an analogous role. Indeed, principles such as that of non-contradiction and the excluded-third can only be comprehended by a subject who has specific characteristics. On the one hand, such a subject must be open to the transcendental horizon, which can be seen in the logical disjunction between contradictory terms. On the other hand, this subject must also be able to think the terms of such a disjunction as both capable of being realised, but not simultaneously: to realise one is to necessarily exclude the other. Hence, a human subject treats these terms as if they were contingent, that is to say they treat them with the typical oscillation of a subject capable of freely disposing of their options. For that matter, Jules Lequier considered freedom as the ‘essence of reason’—in fact, reason lives on those principles and on the infinite breadth that they implicitly express.<sup>14</sup>

3.1.3. In order to further advance our point, we must consider the respective models of Thomas and Lequier. In both cases, the transcendental factor is the ‘third’ element which establishes a triadic relationship between the contents as concrete alternatives to one another—practical or theoretical. These alternatives, while not indifferent to each other in dyadic consideration, can be treated as indifferent in triadic consideration, since neither of them can be identified with the intentional *focus* of the human being. In the first model, the role of the ‘third’ element is performed by the good as such, from the perspective of whose ideality, both objects of a practical alternative are infinitely distant. In the second model, the function of ‘third’ is performed by the necessity of non-contradiction, which is a ‘third instance’ (formalistically neutral) with respect to both terms of a logical alternative. Indeed, no matter which of the two is ultimately realised, they cannot be realised together.

3.2. However, the transcendental infinite not only is at the core of human freedom, but also is the implicit pole of attraction for human drives and needs.

In fact, the drives in the human being are certainly rooted in a glandular, and therefore hormonal, base. At the same time, unlike the instincts of *animal brutum*, they can be activated or inhibited also in reference to the symbolic world; for example, in reference to figures which do not indicate a possibility of determined and immediate satisfaction, but rather evoke a possibility of further satisfaction with respect to any given configuration.

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14 On this subject, see Paolo Pagani, *Libertà e non-contraddizione in Jules Lequier* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2000).

This call *ad infinitum* is what makes the drives into real and authentic passions. They each aim at an immeasurable satisfaction; hence, they risk producing disorder and suffocating life when left to themselves.

Therefore, passions must be governed by rational judgment, which must be educated in discerning the specific aims and implicit reasons animating the passions. In addition, rational judgement must be capable of guiding them towards the appropriate means of fulfillment. In this sense, the rational judgment creates ‘waterways’ for the passionate energies, which serve both the individual and relational flourishing of the human being. These ‘waterways’ are what the ancient tradition refers to as ‘ethical virtues’.

#### 4. *The Human Body*

In order to be able to affirm that the transcendental infinite is at the very heart of the human difference, we must show how it is brought to bear on its bodily nature. As we hope to be able to show, the very structure of the human body reflects the infinite which defines and permeates it.

4.1. This is made visible, above all, in the upright posture. Regardless of what the most recent hypotheses concerning the attainment of the upright posture are, one cannot fail to recognise that the human being is the only one who enjoys it in a permanent way. According to the evolutionary paleo-anthropologist Yves Coppens, this is the morphological and functional principle which properly accounts for the specificity of the human body: it is in fact the matrix of all the others.<sup>15</sup> It signifies the tendency to look at individual realities from within a horizon which makes it possible for a human being to exercise the mobility of its gaze. Now, the horizon is an ideal border that has no limit, and alludes to the infinite, that is to the proper object of the human gaze: cognitive and affective.

4.2. Another evident and peculiar trait of human embodiment is the fluid nature of the hand. The hand, unlike the animal’s paw, is transcendently open. As Aristotle and Thomas happily observe, it reflects the all-encompassing capacity of the soul. It does this specifically in its ability to embrace, grasp, and transform in some way everything it comes across. The fluidity of the hand is situated between two extreme poles: the ‘precision

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15 According to Yves Coppens, the straightening of the body and the resulting bipedal locomotion represent the essential transformation of our history, the one which little by little mechanically induces the others, namely the transformations of the hand and the brain. On this subject, see Yves Coppens and Brigitte Senut, *Origines de la bipédie* (Paris: CNRS, 1992).

grip', which gives rise to technology, and the 'caress', which gives rise to the affective relationship.

4.2.1. In the case of the 'precision grip', an individual holds an object in his hand using his thumb and at least one other finger: the thumb makes an abduction movement, while the other fingers involved make a flexing movement, mirroring the thumb. The 'power grip', on the other hand, occurs when an individual grabs an object using all the fingers and the palm of the hand.<sup>16</sup> If the latter also belongs to the abilities of some animals, the former, instead, is typical of human beings only.

The precision grip expresses and initiates our capability to shape the environment around us, rather than us simply adapting to it. It does this by articulating the forms of our transformative intervention in a way which is not rigid and predetermined, but fluid and open to the infinite.

4.2.2. As for the caress, many philosophers, from Sartre to Lévinas, have tried to offer a phenomenology of it. What we can readily observe is that the caress touches the body; it does not grasp or seize. Precisely in this sense, the caress does not reduce the body to a mere thing. It protects, in a more or less pure way, the 'rational form' of the body, and thus its particularly infinite quality. For this reason, the caress does not normally arouse the need to guard one's purity. Such a protective response is in fact the spontaneous reaction which arises when a gaze or gesture that tries to reduce the body (ours or others) to a thing (fungible, usable, replaceable) occurs, neglecting the intentional relation which the human body has with the transcendental infinite.

4.3. A human being's relation to the transcendental infinite is above all made visible in the human face, which develops various and indefinitely changeable attitudes. The clearest manifestation of the suppleness of the human face is the smile. Smiling, unlike laughter, is not a reactive behavior. There is uncontrolled laughing and crying, but no uncontrolled smile. Laughter and tears can be interpreted, as Plessner rightly does, as spontaneous reactions of intolerance towards the imposition of a limit.<sup>17</sup> The smile, on the other hand, indicates the awareness that reality is given within a horizon that goes beyond and relativises any particular content. It is not just an attitude of spontaneous projection beyond the limit, but a positive assumption of the infinite horizon. In the case of the smile, the face, with its

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16 In the 'power grip', the thumb as well as the palm serve primarily to give stability to the grip. In the power grip, there is almost total involvement of all of the hand muscles.

17 Cf. Helmut Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen. Eine Untersuchung der Grenzen menschlichen Verhaltens* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1950).

eyes and lips, mimics this horizon. Only the incommensurability between the given and the infinite horizon in which the given is given justifies the smile, in all its welcoming and benevolently ironic nature. For this reason, a long philosophical tradition considers it a *proprium* of the human being.<sup>18</sup>

### 5. *The Irreducibility of Human Being*

5.1. The tradition that we can call, *lato sensu*, ‘empiricist’ does not take into account the specific difference represented by the transcendental infinite. Indeed, according to such tradition, thinking is equivalent to producing images—and images are always something finite. Therefore, it recognises as legitimate only the potential infinite, which in turn is further reduced to merely one of its aspects: the continuous increase of the finite. This tradition, since it does not take into consideration the transcendental nature of human rationality and affectivity, inevitably comes to treat both as if they were identical to those of the animals.

More precisely, in a theoretical context dominated by empiricism, human rationality is no longer capable of being distinguished in its intellectual uniqueness from the cognitive abilities of animals; and even passion is no longer recognised in its difference from the purely animalistic drive. In such a context, freedom itself becomes incomprehensible or, at the very least, unjustifiable—at least in its proper terms. At best, it is for instance re-proposed as an indeterministic unpredictability.<sup>19</sup>

In such context, any emphasis on the human difference can only be coherently presented as ‘speciesism’.

5.2. However, for the potential infinite to be produced, a generating algorithm is required, that is an ‘engine’ which triggers progress *ad infinitum* within a finite sequence. This engine is the active power which asymptotically attracts that sequence towards the transcendental infinite, which performs a regulatory function. Therefore, the potential infinite itself is not simply an augmented finite. As a matter of fact, it develops thanks to the presence of the transcendental infinite. However, if we consider the potential infinite as outside of this relation, it is always and only given as something finite.

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18 If the Greek *γελᾶω* (from which the Aristotelian *γελαστικόν*) can be ambivalent, the Latin *rideo* (from which the scholastic *risibile*) properly indicates a smile.

19 See in this respect Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

Thus, the infinite is not obtained by either increasing the finite or by removing its limits. Instead, the transcendental infinite must be originally present, for the very dynamics of the *ad infinitum* process to be produced.

5.3. The irreducibility of the human being to something other than itself—either in a regressive sense (the *animal brutum*) or in a progressive sense (the intelligent machine)—depends precisely on the irreducible difference between the transcendental and the potential infinite. Indeed, every form of human reductionism is ultimately based on the claim reducing the transcendental to the potential infinite. The latter can be proposed in the form of an indefinite combination (and meta-combination) of biochemical structures or in the form of an indefinite combination (and meta-combination) of algorithmic structures.

In both cases, we are dealing with ‘finitary’ realities, which are presumed to be able to—respectively—produce or reproduce the properly ‘infinitary’ nature which constitutes human consciousness.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

What I have tried to show so far is, first, that the specific human difference lies in the person’s relation to the transcendental infinite, which emerges from a number of dimensions of human life. Second, that every form of human reductionism is ultimately based on the claim which reduces the transcendental to the potential infinite, and so the condition to the conditioned—as if what logically comes after could justify what logically comes before.

My reflection is part of a neo-classical tradition of thought, which has been developed for many decades in Italy, thanks to the works of Gustavo Bontadini, Virgilio Melchiorre, and Carmelo Vigna, among others. In line with this tradition, my account is not exclusively based on empirical data, and for this very reason it can coherently account for the complexity of the human phenomenon, avoiding any reductionistic contradiction.